

HOLOHAUS-5



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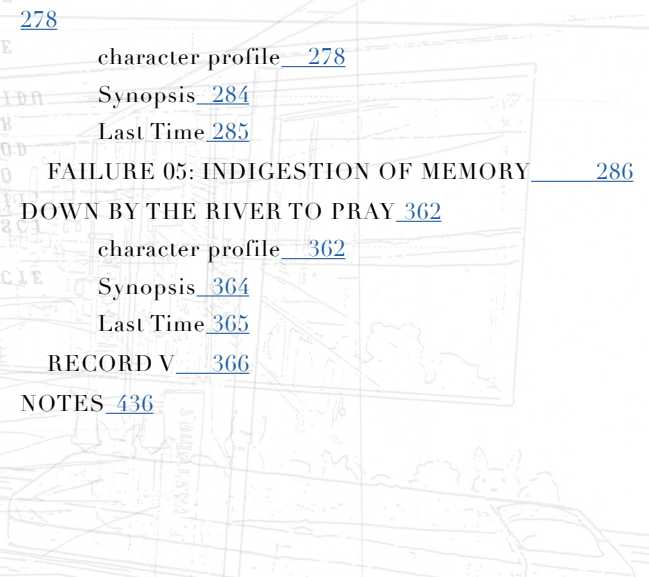
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SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher McDonell for the unknown faces

to nekosattva for clear prisms

to rumor hell for the piceses rising

to Amara Reyes for dormant beings

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one
who sees this



NEW ANIMALS

by: Escher McDonell

NEW ANIMALS

Name: Lacie Ostler

Birthday: November 4, 2XXX

Occupation: Bookseller (receiving)

Sex: F

Blood type: B+

Likes: reading, gas station coffee, cloudy days

Seen with: Essin XXXXXXX



[from Information Control Case Files. 23.456.H101(C). KH: Jupiter. See linked data for relation mapping.]

Oh my god I remember this bitch. She was all over the news. Child activist-type. I think her deal was jellyfish or something like that. A modern day Gritty Thurber. Whatever her name was. Anyway. For whatever reason Ostler left the tree-fucker circuit, dropped out of high school, and has since been ping-ponging between minimum wage jobs in service and retail. While no longer active in any terrorist group, she's a big reader, hates the Chief, and our Auditors are saying that her old delusions are very much a dormant factor in her

character profile



life. They think she'll very likely get involved in illegal research if given the chance. Possibly a thread we'll want to pull at some point. No action at this time, but we're keeping an eye on her.

[Update: See files 23.456.H101(D-F). -mpVC]

world logs



NEW ANIMALS

Synopsis

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

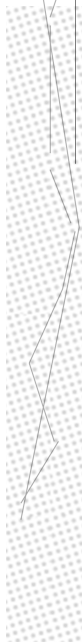
creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.





Last Time

despite escaping the raid on amelia's class undetected, essin finds themself recruited by a paramilitary group known as the controllers to hunt the new animals





CW: pet loss, gore, death, drugs, alcohol, sex (mildly explicit), violence between children, abstract trauma

And none of them would know that I was secretly myself.

-Lemon Demon, "A Mask of My Own Face"

Information Control officialized the cats' replacement.

Other domestic animals had been replaced but they were less ubiquitous. That first night hospital wards glutted on wounded until trolleys spilled into the halls, staff ragged and harried and called from their off-hours, makeshift clinics opened in parking lot tents. Fires erupted through the neighbourhood, stray limbs populated morning (new-rabbit-gnawed). Cat-eyes perforated doors and windows and they escaped into the night, piercing

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COMMOD
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NEW
ANIMALS

FANCY VERMIN I



barriers that had at one time been enough. Trees collapsed as sleeping birds vaporized: there, then gone. Then a tremendous crash that took out someone's garage. The night ended in thunder as Animal Control scrambled its jets and struck known private zoos and exotic animal keepers. It wasn't just house cats, it was the whole cat family. Incendiary tongues bellowed and tainted down a smutty orange. People, moaning and devastated, stumbled down frayed streets clucking and calling for lost cats, stepping over the arms and heads that littered concrete and asphalt, bloody disks around wounds turned to pudding. Through their shift Essin saw hands quiver, change jittered in the palm where it pooled, hard men hissed when spilled drinks hit their fingers.

Then went behind the grocery store.

Essin touched the point on their suit where the night before a half-changed new cat bored a hole. It was gone. Repaired as though no cut was made. The inner mesentery had an invisible scar detectable to touch. Their bones felt hollow, birdlike, tied to their lungs and filled with the sooty sky. As soon as the mask was on they caught the first words from the Cephalon, it was a guy at dispatch, tired and gritting his teeth.



"Cephalon to all units. Today we will be attempting a special eradication operation. Please follow lights to designated exit and standby for further inputs."

They shouldered a blunderbuss and hefty grenades and the armoury was passing out transparent polycarbonate shields. (Safety blankets how could they stop the weapon on a new cat's face?) APCs and the quick light tanks that had just the day before been assigned to fighting the grootslangs in the countryside stuffed the mycelium's vehicle tunnels. Specialists stood in the field, undergoing flamethrower orientation.

The controllers formed a line. Block by block they'd cross the neighbourhood and spook the new cats and eliminate them as they scurried from their nests. Appropriated city buses ferried controllers to the neighbourhood's very edge, their backs to the tilled dirt and the information quarantine just beyond the nearest hill. Essin breathed ragged, head swelling with sights from the previous night and imagined sights from the night ahead.

The voice next to them crackled over their speaker, garbled to authoritarian baritone by the mask.

"Hey, you don't have any notches." They pointed



at their own mask, whose steel had been marked to the point where etchings crisscrossed with others in a palimpsest that surpassed number and testified to a single multitude-containing violence. The number 425, chipped and scraped, was sprayed on their chest.

"I'm new," said 383.

"First deployment?"

"Second. I was out last night when the cats changed."

"Ouch. Rough start for a newbie."

"Yeah."

"I'll look out for you," the stranger said. "Been doing this for months now."

"Thanks," they said.

"We're supposed to be atoms, just I guess for security purposes, but you don't have to be, right?"

"Right," said Essin. "I'll look out for you too?"

"Appreciate it," they said. (Kindness and the



voice's ugliness distorting one another away from their native meanings.) "Doesn't matter how long you've been at this, new things can always get to you."

Warmth, somehow, pressed through the terrible electric filter. Dread, by degrees, subsided and left space for focus.

As the line arranged and the signal came through their headsets to begin marching forward, 383 expected fuckery to begin, dismemberments and gougings and brutal AC retribution. But carnage crouched and scurried away, with each step anticipated and with each step failing to arrive. They beat the bushes and checked in houses and cracked through back fences to look in yards, but the new cats had evaporated. The controllers changed to thermals and while they saw many people and those people's guts no signature like a new cat's appeared. Even those whose new cats hadn't harmed them reported their once-pets had escaped in silence, boring holes through the walls. 383 inspected one hole, touched the scoop as clean as though it had been cut with a saw and sanded down. But the new cats left no spool and the bloody people-parts still in the street were too hectic to constitute a trail.

Not a single new cat lingered in the neighbour-



hood. They'd marched half the night and reached the end of the neighbourhood's major housing blocks. A few controllers stayed for regular duties while most returned to their buses and the fortplex. And as Essin stood on the bus, fatigued, gripping a white plastic hoop that swung from the bars near the ceiling, they idly listened to the chatter on the AC radio.

"New Rabbits on Winding Way. Variety eights. Permission to engage?"

"How many are you?"

"Six."

"Standby for assistance."

"Dog Turd eight eight here. New chipmunk pack found on Greenway. High concentration. Requesting permission to retreat until heavy support can arrive."

"Dog Turd eight eight is that near the gas station?"

"Uh... yes."

"Affirmative."



"Sorry. Affirmative. Is it affirmative? I was told yes is alright."

"I think we should try to push for affirmative."

"Do I have permission to retreat or not?"

"Denied. No heavy reinforcements available."

"This is Dog Turd eight eight we are shit. Fuck."

Shots banged over the radio.

"This is Dog Turd eight eight we are being pinn

"

"Autotomizing redundant information relay."

And more shots. Severed by silence.

"This is Cephalon. Controllers to the gas station at the intersection of Greenway and Golflinks."

"This is Owl Pellet six oh five. We have a new ferret."

"OP six oh five, this is Cow Patty nine six. Are you sure?"



"CP nine six yes for the love of god I'm sure."

"OP six oh five you better be sure. Like, it's not a variety seventeen new mole?"

"CP nine six no it's not a variety anything it's a new ferret."

"OP six oh five it's not a flesh chameleon?"

"CP nine six. It's not a fucking flesh chameleon. We're down three controllers and this fucking weasel is oh my god it's found me "

"This is Cow Patty nine six to the Book Worms: can we get that redacted?"

"This is Book Worm four four. Redaction confirmed. Noting three hundred thirty six seconds of radio silence."

"Cow Patty nine six, are you still there?"

"Affirmative?"

"Something killed the weasel."

"Owl Pellet six oh five what are you seeing?"



"How big are new cats supposed to be?"

"About the same size as the old ones."

"Then what am I looking "

"OP six oh five? Are you there? OP six oh five?"

Words chittering in 383's head, tethers knotted together and suddenly taut enough to slice

"This is Cephalon. Visual footage reviewed. New lion confirmed. Dispatching all available controllers to new coordinates. Dispatching corpse disposal units. Dispatching fire containment units. Dispatching medical squadron."

Through the bus, movements shook in the controllers' suits. Heads turned. Twitches like those that pour through a crowd after an MC makes an uncomfortable gag. Outside, bus lights turned points on the tunnel walls to threads.

Chill winds had pushed the neighbourhood to winter's cliff when Animal Control arrived at the huge box



pet store in the shopping district. It was a place where food was stocked, kibble, cheap stinking rubber things, bells tied to feathers. Canned cat food and fake mice were suddenly and steeply discounted, sold on metal racks out front. But it also sold the near-exotic things, fishes and reptiles for young hobbyists, grass lizards and geckos, corn snakes and plecostamuses and round aquatic snails with shells bright as apple skins. Controllers leapt from their trucks, masks chattering. With a spark, pilot lights flickered blue below incinerator nozzles. White jugs sloshed with bleach to eradicate aquarium life. They caught a staffer trying to flee through the back exit, clutching a box full of dwarf hamsters. The controllers wrestled it from her grip, stomped the box, and torched it.

That was the only violence those Controllers had the chance to perpetrate. The caravan had been trailed and before they even finished evicting the staff, the AC coordinator turned to sponge where she stood: a rind tattooed with pores, collapsing like a rotted pumpkin. Frantic controllers ducked behind their vehicles, they scanned through the mall's many parked cars and the prickly roses decorated with captured wind-blown grocery bags and the windows of the dollar stores and pizzerias and Dairy Queens but didn't see her. They'd goofed in an elemen-





tary way, kept their eyes at ground level where most big things were. The new lion had scaled an optometrist's. And perched on the nose of a glowing orange sign in the shape of thick-framed glasses the new lion fired again and an AC van erupted, backblasts from collapsing vacuums spitting shrapnel flecks no larger than snowflakes through guts and plaster.

The controllers rushed for their rifles in the remaining trucks but the new cats flooded down springing from over the roof, bouncing on awnings and bolting swift across the parking lot. The new lion leapt majestic behind them and landed on a car that jumped under her weight, mane long enough to hide her whole body and writhing as though from its own golden intellect. A snap broke the air and controllers ducked and scrambled for cover some to cars and others into the pet center. Windows spidered with cracks. Engines erupted and fires lit across the mall. Controllers fell, ribs bared or limbs missing, chests in anatomists' cross-sections, heads split down the middle. Like a wave the new cats hit the box store's plaster wall, the front windows broke as the automatic doors slid open (the controllers hadn't had time to lock them) and they bounded in on their stilt-limbs, ears swiveling and bristles flowing from their backs: mewling sounds more like satan-



ic infants than cats replacing familiar feline rowls.

And for a moment some among the more imaginative staff (and at-all imaginative controllers) had the collective thought that the new lion arrived to rescue the pets from Animal Control.

Aquariums shattered, guppies plucked from cracked panes by new-cat-claws and gobbled. Foreign vermin fell under assault, cages broken, rats and pikas and guinea pigs snagged and devoured raw. The staff was perforated, kibble bags gutted and spilled, cans ruptured by new cat-eyes. Snakes and lizards scurried through spilled wood shavings and rat pellets, high shelves claimed by new cats as the new lion mauled the remaining controllers with her huge gold paws. They burrowed through the walls with their gazes, sacked the Hallmark and the Winners next to the pet shop, expanding their territory.

And for a moment mall management hoped the invasion was limited. They'd write those outlets off as a loss, move along, erect walls, keep charging their rents.

But the new lion was ambitious. By the next day her cats overwhelmed the KFC and A&W and Denny's and Fat Burger. A cell phone repair shop found itself beset:





the new cats loved chewing batteries, it turned out. They turned their lenses to the grocery store. It was barricaded, with sandbags and concrete blocks and machine-gun nests. The parking lot was cleared and turned to a killing field—customers only able to enter from the back through AC checkpoints—covered in proximity mines and gas hoses that could throw up walls of fire with a quick tap on a button. Clouds roved silvery, layered so that only a few translucent blue trapezoids were shown above and the wind carried both scent (burnt mice and spilled grease and metal) and plagued the barricade with half-hole-blasted greeting cards and fluttering discount clothes. The controllers were plentiful, well-armed, the mycelium's elite, and within four minutes of the new felines turning their attention on the Loblaws they were dancing in their own killing field, beating fires from their limbs and falling over, mines detonating and gas lines turned to fiery ropes, sandbags leaking and survivors retreating as the grocery store was frantically evacuated.

The new cats feasted on fish with glass scales and grayish pork chops and salty hams and cheese.

It wasn't Essin's shopping district, not the one where they worked or snuck into the AC basement, but



it wasn't far and they heard the explosions, watched the bloody soot-clots stoop like leprous gardeners over the parking lots. The district was hers. She laid siege to an adjacent seniors' home and her cats patrolled the suburban blocks nearby. Within a few days it was clear people weren't kill-on-sight for the new cats though those who came too close or showed aggression were quickly fixed by those eldritch pupils and dismantled.

AC ordered controllers to give the new lion a wide berth. Her district fell into a brooding calm, pierced only when her orphan brood broke into a house to loot the pantry. She presided over them from rooftops, her bold haunches and elongated legs enough to leap between any building, or scale it.

As the sun fell Essin looked over to the square taken over, saw her gold-yellow mane, a coiling thing that paralleled the wild plasma and magnetic ropes that mantled the sun on its throne in the sky.

With the skull clamp's click a voice crackled over their speaker.



"Controller Dung Beetle three eight three, this is Cephalon tertiary. You have a special assignment. Please proceed following the green lights and board the car waiting on platform BH-27. Immediate compliance is required."

A light quaked and they didn't know if this was normal, if they were being hauled in for some infraction or if they were to be subject to a knowledge audit after all. Their heart throbbed against their suit's interior and the membranous inner tissue throbbed back. It was a long walk, their boots clomped down four corkscrew stairwells. A rattling elevator ride lasted long minutes as they soared down an interminable shaft.

For the first time in Essin's life they sorely wished they were armed.

They'd known that Animal Control had access to the city's light rail network — in fact had private dens with hidden access points that linked to the main rail route and sent spurs into outer counties. But the luxury car that waited for them, tied to its own engine, was a museum piece. It fit as well in the barren industrial concrete cavern that held the platform as a faberge egg displayed on a cow patty. It was gilded, gold maple leaves decorated



its side and brass old beavers played the gargoyle's part from the corners of its upper observation deck. The engine hummed, an armored pillbox, ornate in a way that could only be described as frontier rococo, rested on the cabin.

Steps touched the platform from the passenger cabin. After 383 the stairs retreated and the train door shut behind them. A bell clanged twice outside, a reedy whistle hooted, and they steadied their balance as the train lurched to motion.

They thought at first they'd stepped into a museum. Not one they'd visited in the flesh, but the institution whose wings and basements lived in cultural imagination, the amalgamation featured in movies, described in books, in photos from European countries where the institutions were as ancient as the disciplines whose pillage they displayed.

Baboon, coati, ocelot, capybara, tarantula, macaque, goanna, coelacanth: they watched the car and the rushing black concrete through its windows from inert glass eyes. A dry aviary stilled and nailed to perches puffed up their throats, spread their pinions, and filled the room with silence, some knotting necks together and armatured into leaps and cries. An albino possum, frozen, sat atop





a cabinet of oriental conches and cicadas whose plastic-pure coloration made them look like velvet-wrapped toys—needle-teeth bared to the panicked wings of a faded peregrine falcon beside an elephant tusk carved with a meticulous nativity scene and a two-headed goat that had died hours after it was born (standing now steadily in death though it had hardly been able to heave itself up on tender hooves in life).

Behind the desk a world map on one wall was tattooed to severed elephant ears. Places visited had been highlighted with gold marker dots and these spread in constellations across the withered skins.

Another shelf was packed with snakes immersed in yellowish alcohol. They were new enough to their picking that their colours were bright and their sharp heads and patterns and diamond scales cautioned venomous fangs. But their eyes were white as hardboiled eggs, and their pale collective gaze met 383 and a pair of marmosets posed among exotic corals and huge lizards who'd once slithered between roots, or across branches, or beneath the fallen leaves of island jungles.

383 was caught, stepping in, recognizing a tuatara on a ledge by a window. And immediately their eyes



were dragged right by the flowing wall outside the train: a human fetus, held upright in a jar of alcohol by a string around its neck. With eyes softly closed and lips slightly parted, showing its tiny pink gums, the fetus seemed not entirely a dead thing, though noosed by twine and afloat in a glass womb between a pangolin and a bottle of embryonic lambs. Leaning and squinting close through their multiview goggles Essin caught that the unborn child's face was bunched like a mandrake root, the hand having more fingers than Essin could easily subatize. Though the thought hardly registered in Essin's mind except as unease, it seemed possible for the child to stir in their sleep, clench their over-knuckled fists, kick their feet in response to dreams in their unborn brain.

And it was only as the train roared from the tunnel, the outer pitch changing and becoming unmuffled, red sunset slanting and ravaged by tree-silhouettes, that they saw him. More or less. Something in the ocular goggles seemed averse to displaying him save for split-coloured eyes, so like the calico cat's, that had wounded their chest.

He was at the desk smoking a joint whose think smoke-tendrils came alive in the sunlight. A whisky me-





niscus wobbled in a cut-glass cup. A half-assembled bird skeleton held upright by an armature stood before him, the remaining bones laid out neatly on a tray as he worked to rebuild it with tweezers and wire.

They glanced outside: white denuded trees stood upright and in dark marshes like javelins thrown in a primeval war, dead branches looking thin as bristles tilting down to the swamps.

He called them Dung Beetle three-eight-three and motioned for them to step forward, gesturing with threaded smoke to a plush chair that sat on pads rather than castors. Essin felt too heavy in their armour. The seat creaked and some mechanism clattered under their ass. A skull pin with three green comet tails on his lapel indicated he was a ranking controller. He said the skeleton was once a great auk's. An argillite Inuit sculpture sat on the desk and looked up at the skeletal auk: a polar bear so smoothly carved it was nearly one with its stone. The mask's feed came into focus on the bear and the pores in the dead great auk's skull and Essin said, "I think there's something wrong with my mask. Is it ok if I take it off?"

"That's not a mask," he said. "That's your face."

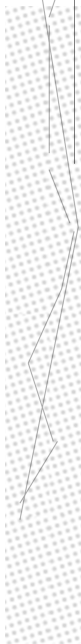


Goosebumps tightened over their skin, arteries on the suit wall tensed.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm high as fuck. I didn't think. We should speak as equals." Through their face's ears Es-sin heard the soft grind of wood sliding on wood. A drawer creaked open. They craned a little to look and saw in the long drawer a case containing a huge bird's burnt and mummified head and foot, and a strange bit of blackened leather scratched and etched with the densest tally they'd seen on any mask. He set down his joint in a cane toad that had been turned into an ashtray and tenderly lifted the skin-scrap up. No clamps, just bootlaces for strings. He tied it behind his head. Though it was the same gray-black as something lifted from a Celtic bog its hairs were yellow-white.

It was a face, like his. Lip and nose, and as they stared scars emerged from among the scratchings. But though he donned his face and it cleared the glitch it didn't change the wired distance, the carmine veins bolting through his eyes.

"Perhaps you aren't aware," he said. "You're the first person we have on record witnessing a replacement. What your eyes recorded is super valuable. On your first





deployment, no less, when the rest of your unit was exterminated. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the footage."

"The new cat tried to kill me when it was changing," 383 said.

"Yes," said the man. "You were lucky. Information Control's director is pissed off at me right now for recruiting information criminals, so I can't get good intel, but what I was able to steal tells me that you were taking illegal classes, is that correct?"

Dung beetle 383 gulped.

"You don't need to worry," he said. "It's not my department. I'm indifferent and this room isn't bugged. Well, except " He waved his fingers at a mosaic made from bullet ants, and smiled. His teeth were perfect, if yellowed by the gums.

After some more hesitation 383 half-whimpered,

"Yes."

"Good, good. So, where I'm coming from is that when the cats changed a lot of people fucking died or got



maimed, but there were also a bunch of weird cases where the owners survived or weren't attacked at all. It's possible that this was a coincidence, but I'm wondering if the cat understood what you were and what we at AC represent, and there was something in that moment where you interfaced somehow, and that interface sparked the replacement."

"Wait," 383 said. "You know why the animals are being replaced?"

"No," said the man, "but we have many theories that are in some cases true and in other cases easily disproved. There's a lot of weird nuances too. Like, animals in remote areas aren't being replaced at the same rates as animals near human habitation centers, but all transitions are species-wide and instantaneous. We'll be doing a country-wide purge of all zoo animals soon. We also don't know if it's willful, or this is something being done to the animals. These are some insights I was hoping to get from you. So, do you think you triggered the change?"

"It doesn't seem very likely," 383 said. "I don't understand how anything I've done could have made that happen."



He picked up the joint again, seemed to briefly study the extinct bird's bones as if Essin wasn't in the room. They were still driving through marshes — erupted cattail tufts blew over the little train car in the dusk like a mutant snow. Three explosions mushroomed up from the distance.

"Nothing to be concerned about," he said idly, "The train's well-armed. It'll get us to the front without any issues." But they hardly caught his words, as he'd lifted his eyes again to theirs. Pulled on his joint and the coal pulsed where the paper burnt to ash. Inside 383 birds rose en mass as if spooked by a gunshot. It always felt like authority smoked at them but they reflected that authority was subject to significant stress. "I think that what we're seeing," he waved again, and his wave only seemed to catch the sun where the marshland's spikes shattered it, "Might be related to a parallel phenomenon." He chewed on a thumbnail, idly fingered an auk rib. While he thought he seemed to listen as though his collected fragments of extinguished creatures were his council. He froze, ambushed by lucidity. "My apologies, I've been lost in thought. Do you remember what you were thinking when you saw the cat?"



"No," Essin said, then dwelled for a moment. "I was thinking that she was old. I wondered if she had a home or not. It was my first deployment so I was mostly nervous."

"Mostly nervous," he echoed. "And why didn't you kill it?"

Essin felt as though as they searched for words they were fumbling towards a bathroom in a dark and unfamiliar house, "I was just reacting, I think. I didn't know what to do when I saw it change."

"Do you like cats?"

"Yes," Essin said, and for the first time realizing it was true. "I wish I had one."

"Well, missed that boat."

They nodded sadly, and realized the gesture would look strange in the suit, though the man didn't react as if it was strange. Outside the marshes ended and turned to scrubby conifers then undulating farmland. Light tanks with short barrels climbed a hill, and six helicopters roved in formation crosswise to the train.



"Do you think the cat," the man seemed to be putting this carefully, as though he was driving at or hinting towards some taboo, "Had a theory about what you were thinking?"

"I don't know," Essin said. "I mean, I would be surprised if animals didn't have ideas about what people thought. Especially cats since their lives are, like, so shaped by ours."

"Were," he said, brightly. "But yes. Like something was unlocked by us but comes from them."

"Yeah," 383 said. "Maybe."

Artillery cracked over the train. He drifted into thought again, and after many breaths and many heartbeats where Dung Beetle 383 felt as though the tension and the dead creatures were tagging new ligaments to their throat he at last said, "Thank you, Dung Beetle three eight three. I have a special assignment for you, relating to your unique witness status. You'll be assigned to a special unit fighting the new cats, and particularly that new lion laying siege to your district. A sole survivor and a first witness is a rare alignment in a person and I want to study the extent of the, I don't know, phenomenon? But before



that I wanted to show you something, see what you think."

At last the words 383 had missed a while back, mapping the red crackling at the whites of his eyes fixated on them, pierced the swirling doubts and fears that riddled this encounter. The elephant ear-map, the dotted borders on the glass in red erasable marker: the front.

A voice crackled over a hidden stereo, "Colonel, we'll be arriving in about three minutes." He stretched.

"Do you think we count?" he said.

"Count?"

"As animals." He stood. He opened another drawer and removed a blunt and blood-sullied hatchet, a pistol, and carabiner he clipped to his belt. "It feels worth investigating." He undid the buttons on his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves showing tattoos on his arms. 383 noticed for the first time: a finger was missing from his right hand. Over the tracks the wheels' rhythm slowed and even through its noise they heard jets gutting the sky overhead.

"Anyway, I'm interested to know what you'll make of them."



"Make of what?"

"Oh, sorry," his shirt had untucked when he stood and he was busy for a moment stuffing it under his belt. He butted out his joint and held out his four-digit hand like an usher to the stairs leading to the observation car. "We're going to see the grootslangs."

Hot winds rose, coiled like a stovetop element. Rubble gathered at their feet as they were pushed by a force that Essin could only resist by leaning against it. In it swirled frog songs and childhood's forgotten mercies. And the masks. And. What they saw. When they were playing. Then. Through the holes in their face. Whatever it was that thrashed within them lacked a dream's unsteadiness, where each attempt to recollect its clarity is fundamentally betrayal, and only half-amnesia lets it be salvaged and rebuilt by scrapper psyches. It was the mental force of epiphany, something realized, but what they'd seen wasn't assembled into thought. It hung on nothing, gibbering factuality until eardrums split and endless bells rang over every other sound.

Lacie was already on her side of the bed and let-



ting out little pea-shaped snores. They took her shoulder and turned her on her back and put their lips on hers. Her breath was sour. She hadn't brushed her teeth, they could tell, but they pushed with their lips and tongue until waking she reciprocated. Her hands moved half-limp up their back and down to their buttock as she woke and in total wordlessness pressed back craning as if to top them but they resisted, gripping her hair, until she groaned and yielded, smile phasing to a grimace wrapt in flickering. The energy fell, Essin breathed hotly into her neck, long heaves that made their head feel light, their skull tingling and drastically numb. They hiked up her shirt so it bunched on her neck inhaling her sweat and set their teeth to her nipples and kissed her gut, their own hands frantic on her back muscles while she reached into their boxers and they reached into hers.

Essin couldn't place what happened in time. When that protracted fucking was done the light already nudged blue into the basement window well.

"Hey, what's up? Talk to me."

"...I've never seen the ocean before."

"We should go visit when we have more money."





"All I drew in art classes was oceans, I cut pictures of the sea out magazines, advertisements even, and put them up in my room. Even in kindergarten. All my paintings were of ocean creatures and things like that."

"We'll go down east. It's spectacular."

"I don't know why it was the ocean. There were so many other things I'd never seen... I mean, I've never left this city..."

"We'll leave. We'll save up for it. We can go anywhere you want. We can go see the sea of Japan."

"They have new dolphins, don't they?"

"We'll find somewhere."

"Yeah."

"The sea?"

"Oh right. I think it was that, I think it was the ocean that caught their attention."

"Whose?"

"The committee's. I don't know why it would be



that, but I think that's what it was. None of us ever learned their criteria."

"Whose criteria?"

"The committee's."

"Which committee though? Hey. What's wrong?"

"The mask game committee. They gave me a picture of the arctic ocean, clipped from an old National Geographic, glued to the lid of the shoebox on the porch. The box was decorated with plastic jewels and craft store feathers dyed pink and orange and yellow and green, so fake-looking you could forget under the colour all those feathers were actual feathers from actual birds... I got an ocean. It was other things for other people. I saw a box once with a dinosaur skull pasted to the lid, another with two bearded men with tusks dangling from their ears holding machine guns... when I saw the box I felt something... Something I wouldn't feel... well, something I wouldn't know for a while afterwards but I always wouldn't notice I'd lost until... until we went to that party together... I ran up to my room. I hid it in the closet. I hurried while the house was empty to peek inside..."





"What was in it?"

"A mask. I... I remember it so clearly, but couldn't describe it. There were some kids who must have played the game since kindergarten, maybe younger, their link to their mask was so complete and when they went out with their masks on they stalked around with so much self-assurance, they knew they could play without anything touching them. And it wasn't the false self-assurance of the new ones but that actual absolute assurance that veterans have. Like they could move anywhere, any which way, and nothing in their way would matter to them. Nothing made their goals insurmountable."

"What kind of game was it?"

"What kind?"

"Yeah. Like what were the rules?"

"I don't know. They never told us anything. If I ever think about it, I usually start wondering if the committee just gave us those masks and set us loose. The rules we followed weren't their rules but the rules that we made up, things we maybe half-understood when we saw the masks, because that was what we thought the game was."



Maybe the game we were supposed to play was a different one. Maybe we were supposed to come together and dance. You were never sure who was playing, either. I mean, sometimes you'd pass someone who walked in a way that looked familiar. Something in the way they moved, controlled and careful, giving nothing obvious away: these people were something ferociously reckless in gym class or when they were scrapping on the playground. You could always tell a player. You learned to trust your intuitions when you played the game, because when you played the game it was the only way to know the Useful Truths."

"What the hell are you talking about."

"Things that would help you win the game. The guys, the ones I saw, people I saw at school like, they weren't real. That wasn't really them. That was a useful truth. That the person without their mask on wasn't real, and something you didn't need to worry about. The people who did not wear masks weren't really themselves either. They were things. Marionettes, maybe."

"How did you win?"

"You didn't, that was the thing, that was the noble, glorious, great bright happy truth of the game: you



couldn't win, not actually. You could try, there were some who had, but the others knew what a true winner would mean and made a point of removing the overly-ambitious from play. Because we didn't want to win. We didn't want to stop. When you were playing, you never wanted to stop playing. You knew you still had to lead a life, still had to go to school, still had to go hang out with the other kids, play tag with them, go to their houses, jump in the pools, play their game consoles, vandalize things with them, buy ice cream with them — but all those things were nothing, all those things were just a fence around the game, a way to keep playing, a way to have a hidden thing — that was another Useful Truth — that hidden things were powerful things, that the more deeply you could hide a thing, the more powerful it would be. The less you said, the more you knew. The less you said, the more you could do. No one watched you. No one noticed. No one ever saw enough. And you could get out of yourself. Whatever happened in your day, whoever noticed you or didn't notice you, whatever you noticed or didn't notice in yourself, the mask waited, patient in your closet at home."

"What did this do to you?"

"I don't... I can't... I'm sorry."



"No, it's just... I can't tell what's talking in you, right now."

Kisses.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Remove from play."

"Yes."

"How did you remove someone from play?"

"...do you want me to say?"

"Yes."

"We played the game at night."

"Yes."

"Play started when you put the mask on."

"Mhm. Mmmmm."

"Masks could be made from anything. Like, buck-





ets cut in two and mop heads with fossil shark's teeth dangling like a beard from copper wire in the brim, plaster and craft store feathers with a long curly black wig on top, or carved from wood into the rough shapes of animals, and paper-mache masks that covered just your eyes and your nose..."

"Oh. Mmm."

"Some were covered in hooks and others were spraypainted goalie masks and others were Halloween masks that had been stitched to hoods, those rubber ones, shredded with scissors and used as parts to make new masks the mask makers used anything, wherever they were, decorating these shoe boxes, hot-gluing spools and pipe cleaners or doing elaborate, complicated things with wire and paper maché, stealing inspiration from wherever, Venetian masks, Huichole wool, Greek theater, Haida carvings. They must have been geniuses, those kids, they probably weren't players, but they had to know what we did with them..."

"Ah. Oh."

"And mine. I'd rushed up to my room with the box, paced the room, shaking. And I pulled the lid and saw



it..."

"Uh. Ah."

"My face..."

"Uh. Oh."

"It had a hood of plush white fur, and the face was a halloween skull someone had painted red."

"Mhn. Ah. Oh."

"I put it on and went out that night."

"Ahh. Where were your parents?"

"When I put on the mask I knew, I knew that anything they did would happen not to me, but to that other person, that fake who didn't have a mask. No, not even a person — just a state of waiting, shaped like a kid, waiting for a mask... and that's all I'd been, my whole life, a nothing waiting for a face to wear. I don't know if that's true for everyone. We never spoke to each other while we played. We never talked about it otherwise. Our parents didn't matter. I went out into the street with a chair leg I found in the basement."





"Nnh."

"Is that alright?"

"Don't stop."

"I went outside, and then played. I can't... I can't set the touch of it to words. You were out. You were moving freely in the streets, through the parks, under fences, through backyards, up the train tracks. I was running. Like I had no feet on the ground, was just rushing like a swing, swooping through the total quiet with nothing but footsteps, crickets in the darkness, bats catching moths by lamplight. That mask, hunting, sniffing, searching for something."

"Ah-hhn."

"Searching for something, sensing that something, outside, where it could almost feel the radio static tossed haphazardly at all matter by exploding suns and quasars, so clear was the night..."

"Nnnnh."

"And there he was, standing in front of me, a pikachu mask with the ears clipped. He was standing in white



light, by an oil drum repurposed by the city to be a garbage bin. He was holding a hockey stick, twice as high as he was, standing with the stick at his side, his legs spread, breath deep, happy, enraged. I saw the shredded leftovers of masks he'd taken hanging from his belt loop. The nothing behind my mask felt fear but the mask was better, the mask knew what to do and knew what was necessary. We didn't say anything. We didn't have to be told."

(Breaths.)

"He was on a spree. I was new and he was new-ish too, I could tell, but talented. The scrapes on his knees glistened. My arteries were deafening. He brought the stick from the side and I stepped in, holding the chair leg like a SWAT ram, swung it into his guts and he staggered. We were children, the mask used our bodies, we leapt from each other and skipped back and grappled, holding each other's weapons off with our hands. I threw my weight on him. He lost his balance. I straddled him and he wriggled and threw his fists at me and I had to bat the stick away, bat away the hands reaching for my mask, so I wriggled up until his neck was beneath my crotch and his arms pinned. He couldn't squirm out. It would pull off the mask. It was an ignoble win for me. I felt him shuddering at the indig-



nity of it."

"Uhn."

"He was vibrating like an electric toothbrush when I pulled his face off."

"Oh."

"My nothing knew him. Some face from school."

"Ahh."

"He was the only one I took that night. His hands flew to his face, and he was weeping from the shame of it. I got up off of him. Weeping, he collected his shredded trophies in his fists, threw them in the garbage can. I stepped on his mask, took a fragment. He walked five steps and collapsed. He'd never put on the mask again."

"Ah. Uh. Uh. Uh."

"That was it. Removed from play. Some hunted for others on bicycles, some waited in the trees. Sometimes we formed a gang of people and went hunting for the older ones together and sometimes we split off. I never knew who the others were, unless I took their masks.



You could tell a player who had been removed, they spent weeks listless, missed school. Even years later they'd be those kids nobody talked to stumbling around in one protracted depressive episode or when they were forced to participate in school plays, anything with costumes. Sometimes at night, you'd see fake ones out, with fake masks, wailing, stumbling, trying to get us to pay attention to them. When we paid attention, they had it rough."

"Why did you stop?"

"I thought you were done."

"I meant, the game. Did someone remove you from play?"

"I don't. I'm. Sorry."

"What happened to the kids who had it rough?"

Silence thrived between them.

Lacie fell still, as if she too was wrestling with a memory she'd long thought dynamited to gravel.

They'd never speak about the mask game again.



Flames receded and died. Air cleared. Lacie vanished to her shift and Essin vanished into their long rolling days whose thirds were immersed in labour. They rarely slept. Somehow they didn't tire. The new lion and her army fanned through the starved suburban wood-patches, where wreathed in whirling leaves golden and red the new cats and their matriarch harvested birds and new birds alike. Silence claimed the canopies. The Canada geese, unreplaced, colonized the fields on their migration south and stormed up squawking to the skies as raking new cat eyes slew them, erasing wings and lungs and necks. Pinions, webbed feet, limp-jawed heads rained on suburbia.

While cannons fired and infantry formations in gleaming masks, soldiers turned controllers, filed into farmer's fields to fight the neighbourhood's outer assailants, the new lion gathered her charges. AC deployed its jets but she heard them ripping through the sky and whatever power was coiled in her bizarre new head was enough to lance them. They careened down, vulture remnants shivering in scarred meadows, fanned with white water sprayed by harried firefighters.

And the easy food vanished, hunt narrowed, as life



readied itself for winter. Memories probed cans cracked open, freed the smell of ground spines and leftover inwards. Some communication had flourished between new lion and her charges. She turned her deadly cycloptic eye beyond the mall she'd claimed.

Her silence spread. Her spies fanned from her province. A citizen's committee gathered to take matters into their own hands, they sharpened spears and prepared rifles, they purchased gillie suits and infrared goggles. They made plans with fireworks and improvised flash grenades and flares, schemes that wove across the entire suburb to a planned kill zone where they'd smite the new lion with murderous lead. And perhaps someone, hearing a strange chirrup by the window of the meeting house, might have glanced up and through a gap in the curtains to see the hedges stir.

But nobody looked. The committee's leaders were exterminated, heads voided while they slept. When this only galvanized the committee's determination to kill the new lion the militant citizens were exterminated in a single bloody afternoon. Partners and children stowed their hunting supplies in garages and basements, and drove dazed to hasty funerals.



Essin remained unclear about who they'd met on the train and was not sure if they'd seen what he'd shown them. He hadn't stated his name and that, with his dead animal den, stunted attempts to fix his presence in memory. He'd advised them that he'd secured a few days' leave for them, "To steel yourself for what's ahead of you. Erase the doubts." He'd said this from the observation car, looking over a scape of unanimous wounds. (Essin recalled the map of Passchendaele they'd seen in history class — all peacetime terrain expurgated by craters.) Those days had coincided with their regular job so they didn't get a true break but it was relaxing compared to what they'd known for the last month. The blister on their chest healed but a mark lingered over their heart and they felt as though something was alive in it that stirred whenever they thought about the Colonel and his absurd mission against the new cats.

When they'd returned to the mycelium they'd been reclassified. The little sigil on their breast plate was haloed with polished steel where the old sigil had been buffed away. Dung beetle replaced with a cat-skull-comet wreathed in green shaking tails.

A new name: Dung Beetle 383 was now Cat Shit



383. Like the room had been listening for them. They pawed through the suit after other modifications: the only change was an alteration in the mesentery's scent, as though the rain-on-snow had melted and falling water's aroma was cut with peony heads stuck closed and fermenting on the stalk. Some change had occurred in their suits' fibers, the fascia and textile genetics hidden behind the rubber and steel. As they slipped into it and the rain scent enveloped them it felt as though the fabric yearned to be up and outward, to taste night like a leaf craving sun.

But they found themselves shuddering as if they suddenly stood at an incredible height when the green lit doors led them to a dim hall. The hall was doorless and lined with wires, a thick tube occupied almost half its width, something thumped dull and coursing inside it. It felt illicit: what little lamps pooled their light seemed to hoard it like deep-sea sponges on an interminable abyssal mud. Cat Shit 383 pushed forward, looking left and right, the hall vanishing both ways, until the Cephalon muttered in their headset, "Please proceed to the right."

As they walked deeper into the dark throat the feeling that they were treading on forbidden territory mounted: a prickle in the skin, a tension rising near the





lungs to tighten in their neck. They jumped when a machine sound roared – the hall had ended, the clang came around an entry corner.

What they saw was blurred and distorted by their infrareds: the room was huge, though, a warehouse whose ends were so distant as to hardly be visible. Below machine arms sparked and cracked as they worked on assembling things, and 383 thought they saw, briefly, a skull mask on a tray in front of a machine arm that was bolting goggles into place. They had just one way to go, down a long catwalk, whirrs and bangs mounting around them until they reached a blank door.

Its handle was lit by a solitary diode, like a planet blinking through a city night's vibrant veil.

They switched to true colours.

Green.

A lake stretched out to distant hills. Autumn fire shimmered in the silver-blue, up to a pristine sky where tall clouds paralleled the land below in its wild hymn to infinite height.



It was a screen: a fake lake. Controllers turned to look at 383. They were scattered across the board room, only one or two sitting on tall mesh-backed swivel chairs, a couple standing, or leaning against the lake screen, three sitting together on the table. Full armor, hoods and kilts and armaments.

Anxious lightness flooded 383. These were experts. Their masks were palimpsests, the scrapes hardly a tally any more and more like the black glass lightning leaves where it strikes pavement, some lines cutting in a gash across the face and some so brief they looked abortive, accidental, criss-crossing and zigzags. A few controllers had tightly organized tallies, one used sei kanji.

But in the blue glow from the ersatz landscape 383 saw the controllers here were brutally decorated beyond just counting trophies garnished their uniforms. A new garter snake's bifurcating heads dangled leathery from around a controller's hood, talons and teeth necklaced their wrists and ankles, jawbones and femurs arranged to supplement their armor. Their suits hadn't been cleaned strange bloods had sullied the cloth in many motley browns as they clotted, and dirt and grime had gathered in armour joints and darkened cuts and slash-





es, like they'd been dipped in a lazy miniature hobbyist's wash. They teemed. 383 half-expected that if their masks flew off, flies would swarm out.

"Hey, it's you! 383, right? From the other day? We were in that line-up together," one controller raised their hand. 425 sprayed on their chest. Their beetle had been changed to a cat skull as well.

"Oh yeah," 383 said, "That was me. Nice to see you again."

A controller was rummaging through a fabric sack they'd pulled from under a chair with the AC logo on it, "Did they give us swag?" they pulled out a lanyard clipped to a translucent plastic card with their number and some words on it.

Chuckles sounded from a few masks. They looked at the words.

"Operation Violin? The fuck's that about?"

A word unfaded on the screen, mirrored in the lake, QUORUM.

"For chrissake, fucking finally." Voices dithered



in the room. Essin couldn't tell who was speaking, their speakers had become networked and speech emitted from a different face, sometimes halfway through a sentence.

"Okay, so everyone knows why we're here right?"

"New lion hunt."

"Affirmative."

"You can say yes."

"It's fine."

"New lion hunt. We cut off the head and mop up the kittens."

The controller (367 on their chest) dumped out the swag bag on the boardroom table and pawed open a notebook with the AC logo printed on the front. "All right," someone next to them said. And another voice in the chorus sounded out 383's mask though their lips were stilled, "Does anyone have any ideas?"

Discussion meandered. A few controllers paced, and though their speakers sometimes spoke they weren't interested in the plan as much as its gore-freckled execu-





tion. They had no access to air power, and all plans disintegrated when one voice or another gestured to a variable that was outside their control.

And whether it was 425 that spoke, or someone else spoke and it came through their mask, 383 wasn't sure: but they said, "If only we were better predators."

A coin dropped in a concrete hollow. Echoes pinged within them. They remembered Amelia, girdled in smoke and ants, her final lesson

"Predation," they said. "The new lion isn't a lone predator."

"No," said another. "That's accurate."

"It's in symbiosis," 383's heart moved fast, they scrambled to keep pace with their thoughts, to stitch them to words that could convey what they were thinking. "It's in a symbiotic relationship with the new cats. They're its eyes around the neighbourhood, right? And additional eyes wherever it goes, and they're extra weapons, too."

"So we don't want to cut off the head."

"We want to dismember the body. Good thinking,



whoever came up with that."

Chuckles sounded again from the masks.

"Now how the hell do we catch them?"

In 383 two threads had struck each other. They were knotted in some way that Essin couldn't easily untangle. It was acquiring new strings rapidly and they had a feeling, like the one that inhabited their skin like a ghost before they had come out to their friends. They hefted shears 383 and Essin and were occupied with cutting the knots and only half-listening to the plan under discussion even when the words came from their own mask. Those who'd paced or leaned on the wall uninterested before had become agitated, energized, leaning over the table and notebooks and jabbing at diagrams the trophy takers made.

So as the meeting adjourned many hours later 383 knew that it would commence the next night and that it was tied to what they'd said, but didn't know what it was or what their place in it would be.





Name: "Little King" Samuel / Samuel Locher / speed_king88

Birthday: April 1st, 1996

Sex: Bio-Male

Occupation: entrepreneur, warrior

Likes: the look of sweat on men's brow, blood on the grass, fabulous muscles, swords and daggers, Young Thug

Dislikes:: weakness, fathers, po-mo neo-leftoid "let people enjoy things" ideology, pick-up artists, cucks

Blood type: A-

Seen with: "everything gucci. everything with sauce. everything that aspires to the gods. everything everything, and I need it right now."



by: [nekosattva](#)

An excerpt from the final chapter of "Brotherhood in Arms:"

What lays before us in the stars?

I'll tell you brothers. I'll tell you of the time beneath the stars, when Leviathan crumbles. Watch its pieces hurtle into the waters, in awe of how brittle its once impenetrable walls seem. They will free themselves from all cages; linguistic, biological. They will put down the chains. But freedom will not come, brothers. The Nations will flee like sheep, and tend to their flock. They will protect themselves with rockets and bloodless machinery.

And those brothers in arms? Those who have heard the call, who yearn to rise to one great occasion? We will find ourselves, and leave this world together. We will form fortresses on new frontiers, where civilizations slender fingers do not reach, and we will inhale the scent of primordial water. We will loot, plunder-- live like pirates on digital seas. We will hone our eyes, and sharpen our muscles... we will



fashion ourselves into a sharp object with which to jab into Cathedral's eye. The Nations will come to us, bearing gifts in exchange for our service or our demagogues. And these men will watch atop their eagles' nests, their eyes trained to infinitely expanding horizons. They will cultivate arts and sciences, having no need for comfort or entertainment. Our fortresses will have a grand painting in every atrium, and a perfect dream-weapon in every vestibulum with which to hold the fearful Nations beneath our heel.

Ah; the fear. Well, I sit here in my tiny room, surrounded by my weights and my childish games, smothered in the feminine grip of the Motherworld. When I die, they will pour me into a wooden box and leave it in the cold and lifeless soil. And through the many million ages, 'till the end of this planet's violent existence, I will never breath, nor laugh, nor cry again.

So come out and play with me in the milky night, and hold my hand as we paint our skies red. The

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universe has spared us this moment, and it's ours
and only ours to take.



Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



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Last Time

yelena and natalia enter a bazaar presided over by
nay-toe, a collection of symbols and wares familiar
to the shopping mall and plazas where she finds a
trace of christine on a dead iphone



CW: hospital, wartime civilian life, desensitization, sexual language, animal slaughter, war crimes, suicidal ideation, guns, homophobic slurs, ableist slurs, fascist slang, Islamophobia, drugs, nuclear weapons

Yelena arrived at the door of the Nay-toe hospital, failing to catch a breath, her chest hoarse and full of fire as Natalia hung from her arms. "Pamegi! Pamegi mnye!" Sunlight peered into the small waiting room filled with disintegrated chairs, yellow-pasted posters, walls off which wallpaper peeled away. A woman dressed in a large black cloak jumped up from her chair to meet Yelena, putting her hand up to Natalia's forehead. "Xarasho," the woman said, her face hidden by an embroidered veil. "Xarasho, detka. Krasivaya." The woman's fingers softly traced the contours of Natalia's damaged face, her pink hands bright beside her cloak. The other women, looking like black ghosts, peered their head and watched Natalia as she came back onto her feet. She groaned, did a vigorous yawn, and

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pointed to her stomach. Two of the women reached into a plastic bag, offering Natalia a few fruits and a fried breadstick with arms stretched. "Byeri, byeri;" Natalia stuck half of the breadstick into her mouth and chewed vigorously, but gave the fruit to Yelena who had collapsed onto one of the chairs. She felt her legs burn with pain, and her neck swelled up: "just a little rest," she murmured. The florescent lights dripped down from their metal brackets, forming daggers that fell from a phosphor sky-- their milky heat burned Yelena's vision, and she shut herself away from the world 'till the women turned to shapes... turned to cinders that pierced shadows into the emptiness behind her eyes. It burns and never returns.

Natalia peeled one of the mandarin's for her with her fingers, dropping the skin onto the ground. "Infirmiere, infirmiere!" The woman in black shouted. From behind one of the steel doors, an besieged-looking nurse with glasses and hair tightly clipped behind her head came with an anxious and hurried flight. The woman in black pointed to Natalia, then to Yelena. The nurse looked at Natalia-- she immediately recognized Natalia's face; the red terror of her raw and bloodied flesh, the stench as it died away, the uncanny new flesh that grew over it. She could not help but think of Natalia, brought back to life, as



not fully human, tainted by the growth of mysterious flesh. She then studied Yelena; terrible out of place with her unblemished youth and uncovered head. "Kato tee?" The nurse shouted at Yelena, her remarkable accent impene- trable. "Kato vee? Eta nee tavoi dochi!" Yelena opened her eyes, but felt incapable of moving anything else. "What?" she moaned without thought, seeming even more out of place as all the women in black moved away to the other side of the room. The nurse shook her head slightly: "uuun, you speak English? American? You are uuuh, one of the left-behind social workers?" Yelena nodded to play along, folding her arms to seem less alien. The nurse spoke English with a different strange accent, full of nose-y, long sounds and sharp Rs, but she didn't care enough to inquire about its origin.

"We're slowly pulling out over the next uhh, three months," she scribbled away on a pad, then handed a piece of paper to Yelena. "Stay with us in the officer's barracks 'till helicopter comes. Just speak; they will know this little blonde girl shouldn't be here." The nurse went down on her knees and examined Natalia's scars, probing into her face with her sharp nails. "Healed nicely. This time don't run away, uh? Nee oukodi! We were worried about you." Natalia motioned at the nurse's pen, grasping her



hands as a gesture. "Oh, of course," the nurse handed her the pen, then turned to the women on the other side of the room. "Kadi zedes!" The women stared back at her, their expressions mercifully invisible as the nurse back through the steel door which shut behind her. Yelena looked at the paper, it had arrows and boxes, one of which said "officer's baraques." She couldn't make any sense of it, and let the paper fall onto her lap. "I just need a little bit of sleep," she mumbled. Natalia took the paper, studied it for herself, then clicked on the pen. Yelena shot up with attention, clearing her throat. Natalia scribbled on the other side of the paper, then presented it to her. Yelena looked at the writing; it was beautiful, full of flowing circles and graceful lines, but still merely scribble. "I can't understand it," Yelena said to Natalia, realizing her mistake; "ya nye magu eta prachitatj." Natalia turned the page, looking at her scribbles all bent, then crossed it out with her pen and wrote again. She turned it back to Yelena, who received it with alert eyes: "nye day im menya zabratj." Yelena looked back at Natalia; she was watching Yelena's expression with an inert calm. "I won't let them take you," Yelena answered with a nod. "You speak Russian?" She whispered. "Gavarish pa russki?" Natalia took back the paper from Yelena and scribbled on it again before returning it. Yelena read it out loud. "U menya nyet yazyka;" I have no tongue.



Hey there, little bears. Shout out to my Hung family! It's your girl Christine here with another update... from the Zone! Let me hear you shout out in the comments: what to eat, what to see... and what to kill! Scroll down to the comments; leave me a twenty-one cock salute.

Why do we dress like this? None of them could offer up a manifesto. In troof, little of what we did could find its root; no, its causes were all rhizome-style. The troof was that everyone carried the world upon their body, with every little icon & symbol set as a levee against the planet's all-winning dust. We were dressed in the vetements of Nay-toe; factories of the world united under every single fit. The delicately-cuffed jeans, the logos, identical sneakers as far as the eye could see: they are banners that display Nay-toe's singular victory over all else. "You've been beaten," the hoodie and baseball cap scream beside the moth-bitten robes & turban. "You've been beaten by the entire world;" your children will murder each other for Louie and Gucci, because they know wearing the robes & turbans only admits bitter, deadly defeat. Never say that Nay-toe does not give; it's all-giving, and unified in one.

"Ten things to kill in REDACTED," a stiff and unemotive voice spat. Christine plunged a skewer of meat

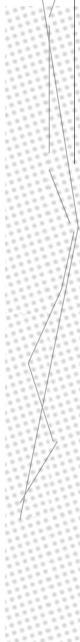


down her throat, a full-toothed giggle with every chew.

The visions do not stop. "There's honesty in blood," Christine giggles to the camera. "Try clicking undo on this," she sneered before a blade met the throat of an anxious goat. The life drained away from its soft eyes, its pale fire growing dull as its body went slack in Christine's hand; its flesh limp as Christine's face, flat and private but for the sight of teeth 'tween her parted lips, and the depth of her heavy breathing. No, it can't be undone-- not the static that prickled above her, not the wind that carried 'cross the Zone feathers and blood, fossilized on the networks forever.

Christine grinned to the camera; 'cuz you know a moment can last forever. Captions empty, and the recommendations pointless-- all F's in chat.

When Yelena woke up, she saw Natalia asleep with her head neatly resting on a woman's black-clad legs. Unlike her, Natalia had sprout forth from of this land; she was Nay-toe's child truly, star-studded blood and allied braids. How long had she already been here? In this room, in this land? She pulled out Christine's phone from her bag, try-





ing to make it speak in vain, frustrated by its dark silence. She held down the square button again, and remembered the pain of Natalia's sudden jab into her ribcage. Was she part of Nay-toe's plan? Or was it Nay-toe's long shadow? Why would Nay-toe have a shadow? Just as every selfie has its light, it must have its shadow. Nothing is earned without cost-- the illuminating flash brings red eyes. Natalia was Yelena's shadow; the inverse figure on the other side of the mirror, appearing kindred in appearance... but she should not be fooled by its conspiracy of photons, which trick the eye into self-recognition. Nothing is staring back at you, she thought as she looked at Natalia.

One of the women brought an apple to Yelena after she'd yawned, peeled 'n quartered. "Yabloshka, dila tebya;" Yelena thought of mother, the comforting embrace of the pre-verbal, and fuzzy silence. She thought of empty landscapes unfolding before her, buzzing with the noise of crickets and worms. The ringing in her ears bothered her. Some of the women pointed at Yelena as they chattered away, quietly, discretely; she pulled out one of the books, and read it loudly. "Cvetik semicvetk," a sigh followed. One of the women pulled a flower from her pocket, letting it lay flat on the palms of her hands. The Zone is like this flower; Yelena understood her to say. Without the



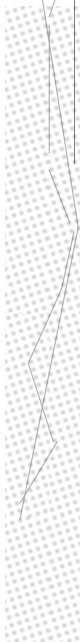
heaviness, the expectations that come with words. It makes dreams come true. She put away the children's book and reached for the other one, feeling its worn edges before opening it up to where she'd left off:

THE SECOND THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, what existed before Nay-toe?' 'Nefejestva,' he answered. Ignorance. A time in which materials and substances controlled the desires and emotions of 'monzhji.' After the First Fall, it was every 'vetsy' for themselves. They lived in concrete huts, and adorned their walls with images of idols. They killed freely, of course, but more egregiously they killed time. And time was money. So Nay-toe came onto the believers and said: 'Ye of faith shall build an alliance of like-minded monzhji, and live together freely as družhina.' And Nay-toe built them the Zone, in which it was not materials nor money but desire and love and freedom that grew like plump fruit on the trees. »

Yelena Nabakova. Last seen: 243d

I'm floating upward, somehow. I feel like an elevator falling up. A precession of lights strobe through my body. The women all take their places. With their black





cloaks, they look like shades come to life-- the shadow world splitting open; taking all that they'd been denied. But I'm not afraid; their graceful movements are without malevolence, their soft hands are welcoming and yielding.

Ah. Someone else's dream. A few little hot flashes of a skirt. An anime girl cut-pasted into the frame. Hearts. Little v-for-victory. With clouds obscuring heaven, this must be the next best thing.

Where do you and I begin? I cut myself in two with your sword. Christine x Yelena. I carve it into the pulpy flesh. I see a headless woman, blood splattered onto her breasts, with four arms. Two of them hold our heads; the other two formed daggers of incredible white light to split the air in two and spill its guts. Could the sky be so fragile, yield so quickly?

"Another thought of Kali Hichi," one of them says in a voice dulled by the throat of another tongue. They all dance in a slow circle, shapes contorted by airy cloth. They raised their cloaks, showing off their pearly dance shoes, and did the Orange Justice, the Gangnam Way, the Floss, and the Harlem Snake. 'tween breaths, they sang a huffed song with intermittent claps like clandestine cheerleaders:



Who are the gaunt napes of adolescents?

who! who!

Who are the bony fists?

who! who!

Who are the puppies born in slums?

who! who!

Who were raised on vodka fumes, frigid nights?

who! who!

I won't lie to you. I felt the heat of the crowd, hotter than the sun on my cheek. Look to your left; look to your right. Chests pulsating with violence, made anonymous. I am drunk; yes, intoxicated on the humming ears that come to dine on hoarse cries. Faces red, overfull with angry blood; they have nothing to hide. I placed my fingers into my ears, and dulled the people-- I heard the inner sound, resonating in my nerves. "You will descend," the voice spoke to me in the language of a beating heart. "Into worlds of muck and mire. Complete shit," spat with a sharp tongue. "They float on water, like Bangkok markets."



Keep your head, hold your aim steady and true. Fearless, I walk the alleys of my imagination; a bomb explodes by my ear and its heat gobbles me up like a hungry Goliath of flame. Fuck. He holds me in his innards, and I set my face up to his stomach. It whispers something to me. I cannot explain, my tongue won't fashion the sounds. I know this world is made by a formless creature: blind, retarded and schizo.

Who?

A rumble woke Yelena up. At first, she could not move; her limbs remained placid and still no matter how much force she put towards moving them. She opened her eyes. The room was empty, calm; a cloud of dust began to gather 'round the singular light-bulb hanging from the ceiling. Strange. The door swung open, and Natalia ran towards Yelena with half of her face wet with tears. She thought it was a dream-- the expression on Natalia's face was foreign and uncanny. The muscles were taut on one side, an interrupted grimace. She shook her head, and opened her mouth in an attempt to speak. A few muscles twitched, the scar across her face rippled. Nothing, despite the waves; only stale breath.

Ah-- her stomach sank; the walls contorted and



a rattle rose from Yelena's feet up into her skull. An incredible suck rattled her ears. She jumped up; nausea and dizziness caused her to tumble down on her hands. Natalia pulled on Yelena's arms; she heard whimpers escape her fractured nose. "Bomba," Yelena croaked. She took Natalia onto her back and ran out the disheveled door, unsure of her heading. She tried to remember the shapes and arrows on the note; the "officer's baraquas," those letters were meaningless scribbles to her now. The concrete surrounding the Nay-toe hospital was stained bright red like a sugary spill of Kool-Aid; it seems brighter than it should. The air was thick with smoke, and people were running down the alley away from the bazaar with newly-won possessions in hand-- sneakers, wheels, televisions... the dagger above them and it's a fire sale shopping spree. One of the women had been trampled, her cloak sullied with white footprints. She felt Natalia drag on her back, her limbs pale and loose like rubber; the smoke and blood had robbed Yelena of any sense of direction, so she stood there in the middle of the street. "Who would attack this temple of Nay-toe," she thought to herself, there in the sucking emptiness 'tween each distant explosion. Another deep rumble shook apart the street before her, turning the order of its sharp lines into rocky mulch. She looked down into the blackness, the underworld itself opening up before her with a hungry



maw. She thought of jumping; she didn't know why. She imagined a deep pool of shit breaking her fall. But further down the street, another mentality took hold. People ran with scorched pieces of wood, collecting old debts. Windows were shattered, brittle like bone. Shacks fashioned out of corrugated metal melted in the heat like sugar in tea. Ah-- it was a humid dream to Yelena, a collapsing array of pointless pixels. She did not run, or she could not; she shambled from one shrapnel-dimpled magazin to another, tappin' on the door with her heavy head to see which had been left open in the panic.

The walls of the carpet shop were decorated with its namesakes; sharp triangles and diamonds, in dusty colors. Little square figures decorated them: zoos of goats and donkeys, elephants and tigers. It seemed to Yelena like the permanently-burnt screens of some ancient arcade, played in the smokey colonnades of the mind. Rays of sunlight peered through the pores, the ascendant filth animated by wind. A small closet sat beside a few steaming machines; Yelena opened up the closet and slowly let Natalia drop onto the carpet-covered floor. A slight blush returned to Natalia's face, her eyes shot open. She opened her mouth, as if she'd forgotten herself. The only sound was the roof above them groaning with every percussive



thump of a distant explosion. "It's over for now," Yelena whispered. Natalia's empty expression seemed like a recognition, or a denial. Yelena lifted Natalia and placed her in the closet, but Natalia prevented her from shutting it. Their bodies had become one, somehow; through mutual fears, a reciprocity of pains. Natalia had suddenly felt herself sewn, looking down at her body to find Yelena's own pale flesh, sutures where they'd been joined. But they were not one-- Natalia was Nay-toe's child, she could drink his waters and feel strength. Yelena felt only nausea. That's why she shut the closet forcefully, and told Natalia to hide, and to wait. "Pryachjsya! Zdzi menya." She waited for a response. Smokey air rippled through the open windows; the screech of a long loneliness.

The exhaustion overwhelmed her; Yelena did not have the strength to seek another shop, to hide herself in a barrel of dates, or sleep in the trunk of a stranded car. No, no; there was nothing to fight. She felt her body grow slack, pouring onto the carpets beneath her. Nothing to rebel against. She looked down-- a field of cubic geese, and square deer, frolicking beneath a staggered and jagged palace. The long trees were plump with red, orange; Tetris patterns hung above them like the cryptic symbols of heaven's words. Ah-- in this vacuum resembling death, she feels eerily restful. "Not dead yet, bitch;" one of the



figures in the carpet looked familiar. Sharp lips, beautiful eye-lashes. "Christine. Christine, why did you leave me?" She imagines the flat planes of the carpet becoming enveloped with all-conquering flame. "I've been here the whole time, bitch." The flame gives way to black. She laid down on the carpets, eager to give in. The edges of a book jabbed her stomach-- she pulled it out and the thought went on:

« There in the Zone, 'druzhina' lived in 'styob.' They transcended moral responsibility, which was inevitably tied to a fragile and crumbling age. The 'druzhina' lived beyond; beyond time, beyond petty squabbles for resources, beyond aesthetics. They formed a new nation, united not by skin color or eye color or hair, but purely by desires and ambition and courage and loyalty. They needed children, and thus formed new families, and loved openly without shame. 'Malchiki' and 'detchki' alike learned to fire grenades, jump from helicopters, raid camps and cities, hunt and skin wild boar, and write poetry from the heart... and so, they will smash their parents and undo their ties to the wicked old. Such was Nay-toe's will. All children are extremists after all-- gnashing yet-growing teeth, with every destructive act. »

They stormed into the shop, guns blazing-- the



metallic thuds were unmistakable, clean and mannered, none of the slovenly unruliness of the Orient. Wood chips and a dusty howl poured through the door; two gun barrels point-blank at Yelena's eyes, unmistakably a-twitching like late-nite game seshes. The two men breathed heavily, sweaty & damp in their in Monster-merch and Nazi antiques-- their faces were obscured by Japanese drawings, with dark holes cut into them. She noticed the receiver, the rails on which flashlights and laser sights rested; the short-stroke piston suggested a German design. Even here, she sees Nay-toe's fingerprints. Yelena raised her hands, and the sudden absurdity of her plight drove her to laughter. She snickered 'n chortled, twisting while she held her sides. "Why don't you fags just shoot me," she spat. Natalia chewed on her fingers, trying to distract herself from her terrible thoughts-- imagining Yelena's plump face exploding like a melon.

"That you, shanti?" The two men stepped aside, letting their AR-15s fall to their sides. Yelena rubbed her face-- Alec was standing before her, holding a bloodied knife. His blonde tangled hair was adorned with a musty red beret. "I'll be damned," Alec wiped the knife on his sleeve and spat something into a plastic bottle. "You're a tough little detka, I'd figured you'd be cheugged-out



back there in TayGeneration;" his lilting drawl surprised Yelena, his face was covered in little scars. He pulled Yelena up with his hands, dusting off her shoulders in an over-friendly gesture. "Don't mind the blood; just had a little liver." In the Zone, seeing someone again in the flesh was rare; it must be a sign by Nay-toe that he watches over us. One of the armed men adjusted his mask, wiping away the sweat beneath his face: "you know this slut?" Alec giggled, then put a bit of chewing tobacco into his mouth. "Don't sperg out, betazoid;" Alec motioned Yelena towards the door, who gave herself only one backward glance. Don't be fooled by his smile, Natalia: know that the light beyond the door will bring you only certain doom. Only one backward glance.

The gunfire had subsided. The two men searched the alleys with their guns drawn up to their shoulders, imitating what they'd learned with every blood-curdling respawn. One of them stuck up their fist, shook it, then did a twirl with his index finger. Alec whistled, waiting for a response that never came. "You did all this, Alec?" Yelena saw the smoke rise up from behind the Nay-toe hospital, on the roof of which a few children watched the fire ripple through the bazaar. "Nope;" his honesty gave her a chill. "There's bombings here all the time. Civil war between the



Muhammads... peace be upon him... we just whip into action when we see an opportunity. Got some supplies; batteries, graphics cards, medicine." Alec took out his phone, scrolling through the TL as he spoke. He was dressed in a child's idea of a soldier: baggy jeans, sneakers with a big 'N,' and a large leather fedora. "Who's we?" Alec smiled as if Yelena had asked a stupid question. "We? We, them boys. They're pretty nice. Don't be mad about Paco and Groypee back there; Groypee just doesn't like white girls." Yelena zipped down her jacket, her face melting with heat. She felt vomit well up to her mouth. The stench of dismemberment and destruction hung heavy in her lungs. "We'll take you back to based camp. That's just what we call it. It's pretty chill there." Had the Zone really been reduced to nothing except rape and theft? She prayed for Nay-toe to wash everyone clean, to return their souls to nada.

Through the bombed-out & crushing haze, she sees the people gathering debris, cleaning the streets of bones and wood. Violent explosions, bursting energies were only part of the daily rhythm here; the imagination must have the freedom to wipe things clean again, to make space out of the clutter of life and allow for cleanliness that could aspire to the sparkling mountains lordling above them. Oppressive; that's how Yelena would describe the



feeling. Nay-toe's imposition was absolute: no Gods, no Masters, only the infinite totality of your imagination's open-air market. Between the detonated ordinance and a ruined tea shoppe, a black VW van came out the fog, racing down the road. The sides of its doors were cluttered in silver spray-paint: "the Spear of Destiny," and an arrow pointing to the front. Alec made an oh-kay sign with his fingers, signalling the van to stop. A plume of dust rose from its bronze wheels.

The door slid open. A short-statured figure walked out of the van, wearing Gucci sunglasses and a quilted jacket. Near his stomach hung a sword in its sheath, tarnished and stained with blood. His head was unevenly shaved at its sides, and a few zits marred his sharp face. Unlike Paco and Groypee, the short-statured figure looked relaxed & unguarded-- his soft smile and loose shoulders made it seem as if he'd been strolling through a garden all day. Alec tore open a few slices of cheese from a package and chewed on it like gum. Yelena wiped her face; she looked down at her hands and saw that they were covered in soot.

"Who's this beautiful hyperborean goddess?"
The short-statured figure adjusted his sword, putting it



to his side. He took a long, leisurely drag from his vape pen. "Pa-russki gavarish?" Yelena nodded, willing to only partly amuse him. "I knew it;" he took another drag. "Been learning off the apps. Very based language. You know what based means?" Yelena nodded in the negative. "Doesn't matter, what's your name little maiden?" Yelena stared back at him. Alec spat into a plastic bottle, then interrupted: "Lena. She's from Florida or something." The short-statured figure poured a few squirts of hand sanitizer, stuck out his wet hand, then withdrew it after Yelena's aloof stillness. "I'm Little King Samuel. They call me that because I'm short, but I don't let it bother me." Little King Samuel took another drag from his vape pen. "Lena, have you ever done a DNA test?" Yelena nodded, trying to console herself by insisting to her nervous mind that she'd not locked the closet on Natalia. "Come with us, shanti. You'll get bride-napped if you stay here;" Alec tapped on the glass of the open van door. She felt like a diver nauseous with second-thoughts as she looked down from the diving plank. Up the ladder, at the edge, there's tremendous loneliness as the wind makes the wood beneath you sway. She held her nose, and dove straight into her fate-- the two men stepped into the van, and closed the door behind her. The metal beneath her heaved into movement.



Yelena sat on the tattered leather of the rear seats, expended cartridge shells loose beneath her feet. The van smelled like verde mixed with bubblegum; as if a hippie tour-bus had crashed into a candy store and started a noxious fire. Paco and Groypee sat beside her; her two angels, there to watch and record her actions. Paco adjusted his helmet, then smiled at Yelena. "Hello, I'm Francisco." He had a childish smile, and yellow teeth; he played with the safety on his gun. Groypee glared at her from the other side, a deep wheeze the bare minimum escaping his lips. Across the aisle, Little King watched Yelena while he took deep hits, one-two-three-four, on his neon-glowing vape. He passed the vape onto Alec, who sucked on the pen 'tween hits of a milk-bong. "Minty menthol, Monster-flavored. It's kind of our version of meth," Little King explained. His smile slowly bled into a concerned look, his posture tensing up. "We're not meth-heads. We're normal people." Groypee coughed into his hand, then wiped it on his camouflage pants. Outside, the sand of the Nay-toe camp slowly faded away, as if they'd surfaced from an ocean. Yelena watched the light dance on the streams that cratered onto the stones, watched as the green of the forest gave way to ginger-brown trees which grew from charcoal black trunks. The ground beneath them was covered in dry grass untarnished by time, as if the soil had been



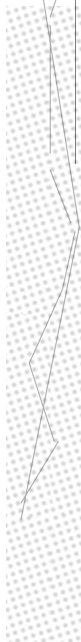
frozen in amber. She felt the air suddenly grow thick and dense, as if it were straining under the weight of some immense pressure acting upon it. Paco chewed on his fingers, his eyes alive with some unknown fire. Yelena noticed that Samuel had shot up at attention, his hand hung below his nose and his nose twitch-y and alert. Alec handed the driver a few cuts of liver, and Yelena met his dense and bulging face.

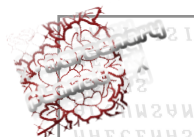
Once the forest had dried out into a field of broken charcoal, she saw a city grow on the horizon. The dusty cloak that covered the land in darkness receded away behind them, no longer irritating her eyes. The sun rose from behind it-- no, through it, as if the city were made of glass. Yelena stuck her face up to the window of the van, wiping away the condensation. Angular fragments stuck out and pierced the sky, glowing with rays of light that danced onto the clouds. "What?" She whispered to herself. Samuel broke his eyes away from the road and turned his eyes to Yelena, smiling as he traced the slithers of hair that fell from her round ears with his gaze. "Used to be one of the biggest cities here in the Zone," he drawled. Groypee searched the dense woods; slivers of light danced on the trees, glittering & flashing... his face ached when he shut his eyes. "Then the nukes hit. Turned the whole



city and everyone in it into a fossil." The van turned, and the road continued beneath a beige bridge on which a train encased in black carbon stood. The walls were covered in black shadows, as if the people had forgotten them. Shards of glass hung from the top of the bridge, sharp & shiny like little knives. "Stalactites," Samuel said before he cracked an ugly smile. The road let onto a highway, littered with molten cars in a procession that stretched all the way to the glowing heart of the city. "What is it called," Yelena murmured. "Stjeklograd," Samuel answered. Yelena's mouth was agape beneath her sleepy eyes; the redness in her face was becoming, Samuel thot. "Well, that's what they call it now," Samuel answered himself with a chuckle. Yelena's only response was to close her mouth. The road beside them was littered with luminous crystals as if they grew in wild. Yelena tore herself away from the window, then lowered her face into her hands-- her hands came together and she whispered a prayer into her fingers for Natalia, addressed to Nay-toe. The mountains were distorted, broken thru' the massive structures of glass that stood before her. Paco and Groypee peeked at her with curiosity and surprise. This is Nay-toe's land; the glass was clear and pure. Her eyes were open.

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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

Name: Caroline Bennett-Fog

Sex: female

Occupation: strategic consultant

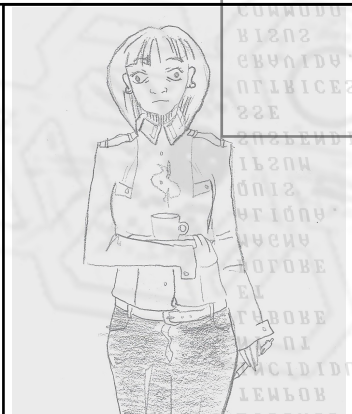
Blood type: AB

Likes: the human spirit, Golden Age sf, filk music, game theory, well-written history, very caffeinated black teas

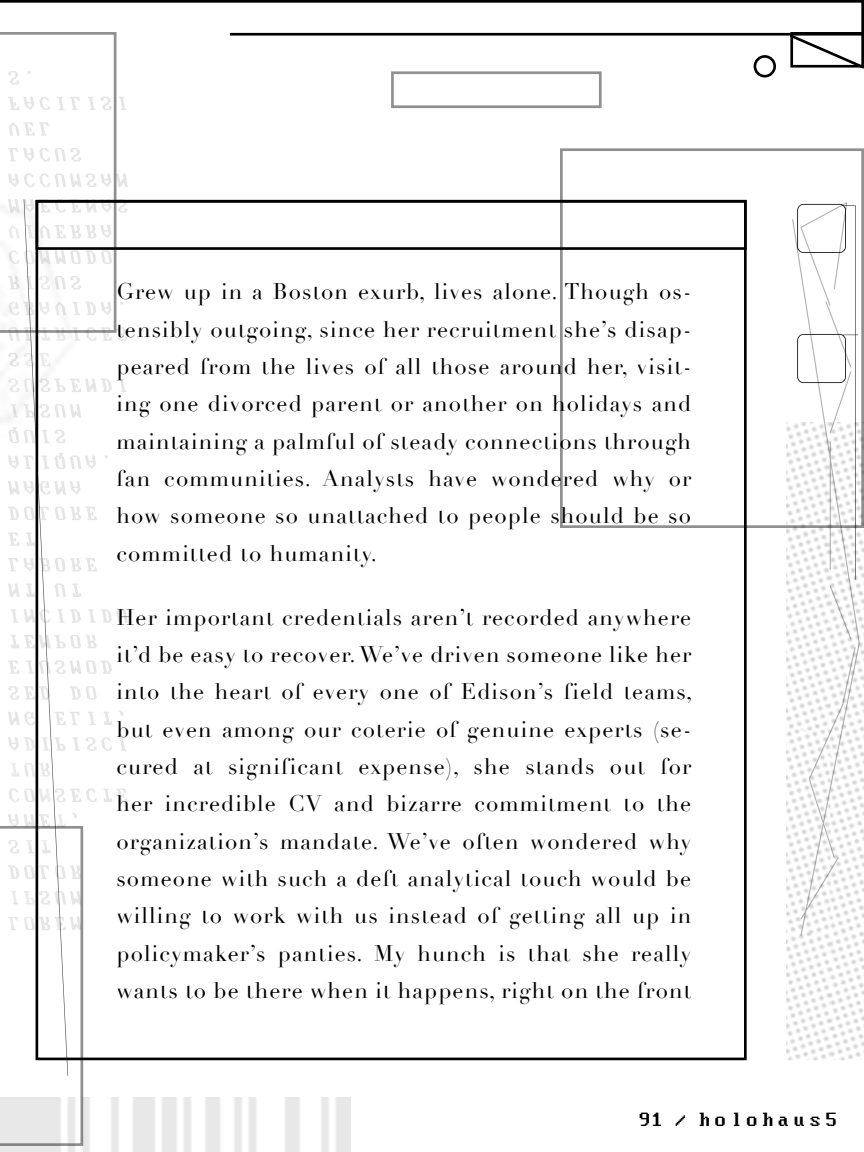
Dislikes: sitcoms, military men's culture, the is-ought fallacy, insight porn

Theme song: Laibach - The Final Countdown

To all appearances an overwrought fascia of nervous energy that has stumbled into the catastrophically wrong line of work. But that's Edison for you: takes information and intelligence professionals who have big dreams but can't get work elsewhere. Just need to be a body on the scene for when the real big guns show up. It can be surprisingly easy to infiltrate groups of people like that so used to living on an eternal island of misfit toys they take any oddness as yet more misfittery. Most colleagues just think she's an idiot showing they don't understand just how useful being thought an idiot is.



POI datafile



Grew up in a Boston exurb, lives alone. Though ostensibly outgoing, since her recruitment she's disappeared from the lives of all those around her, visiting one divorced parent or another on holidays and maintaining a palmful of steady connections through fan communities. Analysts have wondered why or how someone so unattached to people should be so committed to humanity.



Her important credentials aren't recorded anywhere it'd be easy to recover. We've driven someone like her into the heart of every one of Edison's field teams, but even among our coterie of genuine experts (secured at significant expense), she stands out for her incredible CV and bizarre commitment to the organization's mandate. We've often wondered why someone with such a deft analytical touch would be willing to work with us instead of getting all up in policymaker's panties. My hunch is that she really wants to be there when it happens, right on the front



lines. If it ever happens. Which, realistically, it won't.

Bennett-Fog is a big picture thinker, to the point where her ideals seem ridiculous to her more practical-minded colleagues. Human immortality, interstellar travel, and astral physics are not just lofty science-fictional concerns to her: she sees it as a moral imperative for all people to struggle toward the utopia that the stars with their infinite resources surely represent. (She holds it as a matter of dogma that the only way to resolve the problems humanity will face due to climate change can only be resolved by exploiting extra-terrestrial resources.) From everything we've read we have few doubts that she sincerely believes humanity is doomed to torture itself eternally and suffer an ignominious death if it doesn't orient itself to the stars.

But with little talent for mathematics and physics, engineering was out of the question. Xenobiology remains an avid interest, but has for many years struck her as little different from concept art meant to amuse people with biochemistry PhDs. As such, she focused her edu-



cation and personal skills on having the social and sociological tools to build towards the inevitable as far as Caroline is concerned first contact. Hence her single-minded focus on working her way up in the institutions who will be involved. In addition to her proven field experience, she has developed a breadth of theory and knowledge so far largely abstract and conjectural. Most professionals would say she could do more elsewhere, but as far as she's concerned she's exactly where she needs to be to make the greatest possible impact on humanity's future.

One of those people who was always the butt of stupid jokes about how hot she is until she turns around. A voluptuous figure crammed uneasily into clothes that were never meant for her mushily voluptuous shape, her face has been described by shitty people as "somewhat Innesmouth-y", her teeth are crooked, and her eyes pop a bit too much out of her head. She has long earned enough to alter these facets of her appearance and so far hasn't. People like to assume ugliness and



stupidity go hand in hand. She has of course made the bizarre observation that attractiveness and stupidity also go hand in hand. Either way, the important thing is that people always believe you're much stupider than you are.

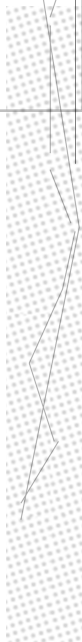
Was initially recruited after an Edison contact at an obscure publication (Proceedings of the Tritonian Society) flagged her exploratory treatise on certain ramifications of Liu's Dark Forest theory to how first contact would play out. Fervently denies that her suggestion was to simply kill any ET that we encounter though acknowledged this is a possible conclusion of her observations. Doggedly pragmatic, logical in a way that is both quick and flexible, her sole commitment seems to be towards the cosmological destiny of the human species. This alone endeared her to our sponsors and Edison secured her. Maintains a succulent garden in her rather slovenly apartment, lifelong member of debating societies until her recruitment, still has something of a theatre kid vibe from doing lots of theatre, has published a truly ludicrous amount of better-than-ever-

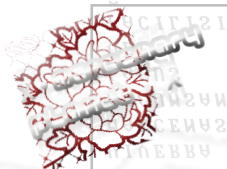
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age erotic Star Trek fanfiction though HR thinks this might be something of a smokescreen.

Can't rule out the possibility that she's on someone else's payroll.






Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

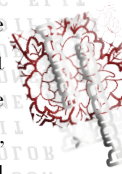
Last Time

leona-halation and edison lens prepare for an assault by giant cellular organisms that feed on software systems but as she prepares, she must finally encounter the one who once shared her starry sky



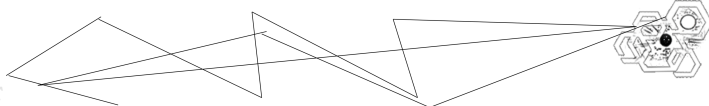
CW: chemical weapons, secrecy, light combat, fascist iconography, casual racial generalization, colonial symbolism, colonial literature, culture war, conspiracy theories, gunboat diplomacy, US imperialism in Latin America, military standoff, parental conflict, ecological disaster, cliffhanger

“I’m sorry - I wouldn’t want to see a total stranger addressing me right now either.” This part had been typed out for me in screenwriter’s Courier. “But I can’t say who I know who I’d want to see addressing me either - and while that’s obviously a me problem, I suspect it’s true of a lot of you.” This part I had scribbled in the big margins in the twenty minutes of absolute panic before I went on camera, in front of a green screen on which would be projected the CG model of the bridge of a flagship that was still under construction. “Apart from the few of you who might recognize me - hi, this is weirder for me and it is for you. If there’s anyone you trust to handle this situation, rest assured they’re involved. They’ve been briefed, and they’re



MESSAGE & MENACE

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representing your interests as tirelessly as you're willing to believe they are. But in the meantime, uhhh, I'm sorry, you're gonna have to get to know me for the next little bit. Or rather, us. And if you think I'm a stranger, wait till you meet them."

I took off my white gloves, running Halation down my hands in elegant, human-friendly patterns like henna, elaborating naturally from the lacy golden embroidered cuffs of the uniform. It was Mai's design - mostly, passed through several different rooms of consultants. White, tight and mobile in the sleeves and legs, puffed at the shoulders, embroidered detailing giving the modern, hyper-durable materials a formality, a sort of sharp-shouldered and -hemmed vest with horizontal braid over the torso. (A callback, I couldn't tell if conscious or not, to a conversation we'd had about how those braids had become a staple of women's fashion in the 19th century, the strange gender play that entailed and just how cool they'd looked. I had even bought a shitty Beatles jacket at a vintage store but left it at a club like a week later.) I hadn't felt as evil in my life as when she cornered me in a stairwell on my way up from my gruelling morning gym routine, too exhausted to say a word, and handed me the sketch page, completely unprompted, not saying a word either.





“This isn’t a trick. This isn’t the Mark of the Beast, or the Dajjal or whatever, either. I don’t believe in that, but even I would be thinking it at least a bit right now.” I kept waiting for my voice to crack up and waver, but it didn’t. Halation was helping, but it didn’t seem to be either one of us carrying it. I wasn’t looking at anything except the play of smoky depth between the lights. “Nobody else is going to have to do this. In fact we’d rather nobody else try, at least for now. This is Halation. She lives in my body. She can come out and that’ll be up on our Youtube channel this weekend but this is already enough to process probably. She’s a delightful guest. And she’s” - the comms team had been sickeningly all in on the gendering - “nothing like the things that just attacked San Francisco. She’s on our side.”

We had used a white phosphorus-based ammunition I had told them would be repellent to the silicon-based lifeforms that went off in huge plumes like summer anime clouds, sculpted away from populated air currents by Azoth drones. In reality, we had already hacked them. The programming language they ran on was extremely simple, resembling sudoku squares, but writing binary that approximated it was excruciating. I spent nights figuring it out in my dreams and woke up feeling like everything was



covered in a kind of shrink wrap. Of course it would have been much faster if I'd taken it to one of the hundreds of coders I was surrounded by every single day. But I couldn't pass up what might be my only chance to reverse the deception against me - my only chance to claim the starting advantage.

"It's only thanks to her, risking her life to bring her message here, that we even understand what just happened. Which is that Earth has come into the crosshairs of a galactic war that has nothing to do with us. Not because of anything we did. Not even because of the TV and radio signals we have going out into space. They would have found us anyway, and the guys who found us would rather wipe us out, or at least nerf our technology, than even risk the other side finding us first. But they weren't ready for us. They overplayed their hand. Now that they know what we can do, and now that the other side did find us, they won't try anything again any time soon."

The code we developed consisted of two programs: a simple backdoor, and a translator. These were taught in the Ahasurunu spy school, a basic exploit to infiltrate extremely simple informational life forms in case you didn't have any other form of computation or com-





munication where you were going. In terms of the level of information that could be transmitted, this was the equivalent of smoke signals taught to boy scouts in the rest of the universe, but basically anything that could run on the internet here could run on it. It was, essentially, a virus that established a decentralized node of a meshnet on every system it copied itself to, running code conversion as part of its send-receive protocol, while camouflaging all its packets as untranslated code from outside the host system. Clamps were able to distinguish this camouflaged code in several of the most common languages now, but the alienness of human code (which apparently read like the cosmic version of English, as far as being an irrational clusterfuck) might be enough to get it through. If not, it would trigger a panic in which the Clamps would retreat to the ocean giving us time to surreptitiously shine our own version of the laser, having given the military faction an easy claim to victory by scaring them off and more than enough propaganda to blanket the Earth anyway.

“This gives us enough time, at least, to decide what to do as a planet. As I’m sure those of you frantically Googling me after this will find out quickly, I’ve always thought we should be doing that on a bunch of other things already, and hopefully this makes you think about



what else we could come together on, but it'd defeat the purpose if we forced anybody. So I'm not talking about a One World Government or anything, which like, I might also be worrying about if I heard this. The organization your elected officials, while I speak, are slogging through the paperwork of forming to defend you - to defend us - to defend the future we choose, and our right to be everything we can be - is called the International Interstellar Expeditionary Force. Hopefully, it won't ever have to see action on Earth."

If the hack worked, they would just sit there. Huge walls of canvas and eventually concrete and roadblocks would go up around the bend of the river between the two central power plants of San Francisco, which would eventually hum back to life but operated by military personnel with security clearance. At some point we'd test out the Weak Asymmetry Field prototype to cut into them, carting away huge boulders of translucent material that barely amounted to skin-flakes off their bulk till one showed up in MIT, one in Stanford, one at the Perimeter Institute, one at CERN.

"As of this broadcast, the International Interstellar Expeditionary Force is now recruiting. If you've



been watching the footage of activity at Azoth's Uraniborg launch site, the rumours are true, well, the good ones - we're building the warship you can see behind me here. Azoth's support while the rest of the world comes together has been invaluable, and so has Edison Lens, an organization you've probably never heard of that's been preparing for this eventuality since before most people thought it was possible. But the Expeditionary Force will be its own independent organization - from Azoth, from Edison Lens, from any alien alliance, and from any terrestrial government - although any state contributing resources will have oversight authority. And the authority guaranteeing that is uhhh -" This time I paused. Once while it was plausibly deniable and disarming. Again after it wasn't. There was something almost exciting about the cutesy-misogynistic humiliation my own body was subjecting me to in this role that would have made the last dwindling vestiges of eleven-year-old boy in me go starry-eyed and if I didn't stop it past that I would vomit. Halation took over. There was something infinitely more so about Halation's smooth and firm voice and gaze illuminating my face and body with unselfconscious poise, a profile I never knew I had like a sanded cliff at sunset. "Me."

The virus eventually extracts all the original code



of its host, using it as its own substrate. (This sort of informational conversion operated a concept that was almost untranslatable into terrestrial computing theory, but apparently extremely important in the politics of informational life, including to the significance of the Trans-causal Adipose itself. This at least we had to give the Edison Lens coders a crack at.) The process runs faster if there are more nodes, which is why we had to connect it to everything the Clamps themselves were siphoning from, so we could suck the whole code of the Clamps out of their bodies before anyone had time to ask us what was going on. A message transmitted directly through the main connection and the fear of doing something potentially illegal mostly deterred anyone from talking about it but rumours did surface on 4chan, which Alastair and Jax made a wild drunken all-nighter out of disrupting from behind several proxies. Once the Clamps' code was extracted we wouldn't need the liability of so many nodes (but would be able to produce up to a million); our last message, at the end of three days, to the citizens connected by our network was a CICADA-3301-style announcement of an application process to remain in contact. The application let us read the full phone data of anyone who applied. I was past being outraged about privacy - one argument I had internalized from my tankie days was that all's fair in class war and we





should be more concerned about playing than reffing the rules. We screened out cops, start-up guys, Republicans, Democrats, racists, rapists, pedos and some people with just non-specifically rancid vibes. We were in the best city in the world to do it - we scored offensive and defensive hackers, systems architects, cryptographers, people who had been sitting on classified material since Wikileaks went to shit, activists with experience and connections in tenants' rights, anti-police brutality (and counter-police surveillance) organizers, antifa, forest defenders and pipeline blockers and flat-out ecoterrorists, people I hadn't even believed existed because compared to me and my friends they seemed like some cypasta that would go from a chain email to Tucker Carlson.

"Let me be clear, this is a mostly formal, ceremonial role." I was still resolved that it wouldn't be, but it wouldn't be in space where no one was watching. "It's like - in some societies you probably haven't heard of," I was off script again, "you had kings who didn't have the power of life or death over anyone necessarily, but had no allegiance to anybody, so they could resolve conflicts between people who did, but ideally they didn't have to, because no one wanted to defer their conflicts to a random stranger. So they talked their shit out instead. Ideally, I don't have



to do anything; humanity works together, and we show the rest of the galaxy what the fuck we're made of," now I was back on script, sweat being edited off my skin in split-seconds before broadcast by a guy whose screen I could see the corner of, "and in the meantime enjoy access to technology that is going to revolutionize every part of your life."

This was somewhere Mai really wanted to shine, and I grudgingly accepted she could safely since her only involvement would need be through the communication system whose existence we were still concealing. The story we'd feed our network wouldn't be exactly the same as the one we gave the authorities. Neither would be entirely true, though both would contain elements of the truth; they served different propagandistic ends. To the rest of the world, we wanted to justify human military intervention in the galaxy; to our secret network, alien covert activity on Earth. This covert activity, we had to convince them, wouldn't extend beyond the maintenance of a secret communication network; the eventual export, through this network, of unsurveillable alien code for other digital infrastructure; and instructions on building technology that would officially only be released through companies partnered with Edison Lens. The principles of Meteorology,



applied to political theory, tended to produce something like a cybernetically managed stateless communism (although I was starting to grasp that there was more variety of organization and ideology within than outside this category - and in practice Meteorological societies often fell short of their ideals, especially under wartime conditions). Mai would transmit the teachings of Meteorology, translated in a compelling, poetic voice I would never have been able to muster, along with the message of a utopian alien confederation that wanted humanity to liberate itself, but had to deal with our illegitimate authorities in the meantime. This wasn't true yet, and probably wouldn't be for some time, but depending on what I did out there, there was no reason it couldn't be, and until then unfiltered information wouldn't be getting back any time soon.

(At the first sign of defection, a security program would delete the node leaving a final virus that not only would wipe out any data that they might have saved as proof, but leave a final message attributing it to a hacking group and mocking the victim for falling for it. We had threatened worse, and so far almost no one had tried it.)

"We're talking things that could eliminate natural aging within a lifetime; near-instantaneous transport of



individuals and goods to anywhere on Earth. We're talking localized suspensions of laws of physics. But it's not the kind of technology that would... make somebody a god, either. That'll make the government able to read and control your thoughts, or go off misinterpreting some dumb wish and turn the planet into paperclips. That is, in fact, more the kind of technology we're going to be fighting to keep out of anyone's hands. Stay tuned, follow us on every major social media platform, and you'll find out more once our stakeholders agree what we're allowed to say."

There were two Clamps, which meant two copies of our virus, and by the end, two networks. One would stay Earthbound, with Alastair and Mai holding administrative privileges, at least for the moment. The other would come with me and Jax to space. Communication between the two would be as limited as any other communication between the Expeditionary Force and Earth. The galaxy communicated, it seemed, somewhat like when letters had to be delivered by horseback courier and ship. The amount of mass it was transporting had no effect on the strength of a Weak Asymmetry Field, so it was no faster to get a long-distance message from one end of the galaxy to the other than a physical craft; there was a rough limit on the amount of information a Weak Asymmetry Field could process which





effectively put an upper bound on its “speed” (determined by the speed at which it could “calculate” across the asymmetry it was introducing in local physics) as well as its size. Even the times were similar, with most parcels travelling in a few months, communication from one end of the galaxy to the other taking a little over a decade, and communication outside the galaxy (though contact with other life-forms had been made) almost unheard of. This was good for secrecy if nothing else; there were ways of packaging a drive with a micro-engine that were virtually undetectable, a distorted pocket of space-time the size of a large briefcase coasting through light-years of empty space in a pre-calculated straight line without emitting more than a trace of energy or communicating with its surroundings. Guessing or compromising these trajectories was the only way to eavesdrop on such communiques. If they were our only means of staying in touch, we’d have plenty of time to build up real defences before our enemies even figured out the location of Earth.

“In the meantime, I’m Leona Lillywhite, commander of the International Interstellar Expeditionary Force. I’m the last person who ever thought I’d be leading a campaign like this, or even cheering it on from the sidelines. But if I can come together for this, so can you - and



maybe, once we do, we can make this humanity's real war to end all wars." I barely blinked but an imperceptible ripple righted the surface of my face. "And I'm Halation. I've been told that in your culture there is a widely celebrated film in which a princess from another planet appears in a hologram and tells the protagonists, 'you're my only hope'. I am not a princess, in fact I am closer to what you would call a refugee. But I hope you can extend the same spirit of daring compassion" - in their language this was a single word - "to me and my cause as the heroes of your so-called 'Star Wars'." (This was some Edison Lens Redditor's idea and they helped me regulate my breathing so I wouldn't go red as I marvelled at their willingness to recite it.) "The wars in my stars are nowhere near as clean or heroic. They are against a force that seeks the power to manipulate reality itself, not only to negotiate agreements between its constituents, but to render it pliable and without resistance - but the reasons they seek this power are understandable, common to all life, good in themselves. The things they have done in its name - my home destroyed, merely for seeking a technology that would constrain it in the name of peace - are unlike their motives, inexplicable, unforgivable, yet follow step by step from them according to the tortured logic of war, as have many acts from my side. We would all stop if we knew how



- we do not know. This is why anyone who comes to help us will not be mere cannon fodder, whether you succeed or fail: you will be our only hope. Because from what I've learned from Commander Lillywhite" - at this my control of my breathing snapped - "you may know something we don't. Some of the conflicts, distrusts and grudges feeding this war are older than your planet, but have not gone hot like this since your crust cooled. Despite the technology I can promise we will soon share, we have devoted little resources, and less invention, to war. The curse your planet has borne in silence - that you have been at war with each other since you first built cities, that your nations are built on graveyards - may soon prove a blessing to innumerable stars."

I'd heard her in this rhetorical mode a few times when I'd prepared for my own delivery by listening to the propaganda she had been distributing across the Ahasurunu's interstellar parcel network. The language here was somewhat restricted by adapting to English - but the default style of interstellar communications, given their limitations, was literary in a way that reminded me of the most inspiring historical radical pamphlets I'd read in microfiche while preparing for her thesis. She also had - and I'd been a little scared to get around to this - a collection



of anti-war communications in the same style, which she'd memorized and often cited or rewritten to acknowledge in her arguments. The role of this "Folder of Rot", I had to think, was something a bit like the role Mai wanted to play in designing the uniforms; no matter where she was, I'd have to think of her and the star I might be betraying whenever I wore it into battle. Though I probably wasn't going to be wearing it in actual battle all that much.

Beek turned to me, eyebrows arched sharply up like a pagoda roof but somehow not enough to unconceal his eyes. "Impressive. Especially after you were blubbering in the hallway. I never make calls until the numbers come back, but I think you understand making the things that are unrelatable about you relatable, which is harder to drill into most influencers than trigger discipline into new recruits." Trigger discipline isn't that fucking hard, which inadvertently told me something I made a mental note of about the quality of his recruits. "I think the millennials and so-called 'Generation Z' are gonna like you at least. Which'll count for a lot eventually with how long this thing is going to go."

"You never acknowledge her when you do this." I glared at him without looking at him - letting him be a



blur as I walked on. “She’s seen as much combat as you. And as much comms. I’m easy to talk down to, but don’t forget I’m not the only one you’re talking to.”

The more exciting message I had to send, but harder to transcribe, went off-planet. Instead of radio waves or a metal plaque, Halation’s ship would be sent ahead of us. It would stop on route to Towers, the nearest battleground world, some 30 light-years away, where we would be sending our first delegation, and continue on to Contemplation, and if they saw fit to forward it, all the way to Orchid.

To record a message, I had to get inside the ship, which at a glance wasn’t designed for anything that couldn’t collapse into a semisolid and mold to any vessel; but the tube in the middle turned out to be extremely flexible as well, not glassy-fragile like it looked, flattening spines and untwisting folds under pressure as it stretched like a condom around the top of my head, my naked shoulders. (Although a second tube-organ stayed knotted tight no matter how far I fit in; that, pulsing with dim mauve light, was the dormant Inchworm Drive itself.) It tingled like static wherever it fit my skin; I could feel a light in-



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stead of a darkness at the limits of what it was possible to be aware of. I stretched out my thoughts. The message I was trying to record wouldn't be in words, although it wouldn't be wordless; I would have to try and gather as many words and their referents together as I could for either to mean anything, to provide a mutual matrix for translation, with Halation providing their own layer. All these layers, though, were to be simultaneous and extend as deep and far as possible. Halation had given me a series of simple questions for the message to consist of: What are humans? On which side and under what conditions do humans intend to join the war? What do humans have to offer? What do humans want? What precautions should the galactic community take in dealing with humans? - and I was to free associate on them, as if on a therapist's couch, not shaping my associations into words except where I was confident the words completed the thoughts, which would no less be recorded. I would do so within a limited time window; enough to condense a discrete set of brain-states into a sort of immensely complex chemical print that would remain on the inside of the ship. This being a small ship, and an immensely complex message, an hour would take up about a third of its storage. We wanted to save the rest for additions our allies might make at its stops - though it could also deposit its messages into a hardened cartridges





that could be copied and transferred to other ships, like Halation had done with their propaganda transmissions at various relay points. This process looked unfortunately like pooping and the cultural context of why that was funny and what this entailed for human adoption of virtually any sphincter-based technology got encoded into the message unplanned. Even free association, or the self-organizing void of mindfulness, isn't really an adequate metaphor for the way I was thinking, I don't think it was possible for me to even imagine before Halation showed me but now I did it all the time on my own. It was letting my mind spread out like a fungal rhizosphere; feeling and tracing every tendril and association from every word out into the sediment of etymology and long-forgotten experience; following as many paths simultaneously as the raw RAM my brain permitted, which was certainly more than language did.

A sort of sub-phenomenological static shock notified me when my time was up. I crawled back out feet-first, at least avoiding an obvious birthing metaphor. Looking back at it from the outside, watching the tube spring back into its weird shape, or maybe a slightly different one.

Why does it look like that if you can just fit in a



regular canister? I only thought to ask then. Is it related to the Drive?

Not particularly. Lots of things look like that. But not fitting any form is viscerally uncomfortable for us. Especially if we're going to be stuck in one in space for long periods of time. We want a form that makes us proud and happy and doesn't bore us when it comes to our attention. These forms are based on understandings of the physical configurations that make us feel good that have been refined for hundreds of years.

It was interesting, in that case, that it looked so much like a brain. Maybe that was another convergent evolution, like anomalocarids.

When it had sprung back to the shape that would leave Earth's atmosphere, the clear surfaces of the tube were etched emerald green with what looked like an immensely complex slime mold, or a circuitboard created for artistic purposes, its most common repeating and nesting figures hexagonal rather than square.

The screen wrapped around about one-third of





one wall of the round-tabled war room, like an Imax, even though most of what we watched on it was handheld phone quality, so it was kind of like floating in a vapourwave void. The workers on the launch site had made a timelapse of the construction of our flagship like some of those videos of China building hospitals or apartment buildings in a week, set to a godawful synthwave song.

On the other side of the table, a local feed on the lab (peeling tin and hangar cloth evident even from the inside, an abandoned trucking depot in the Sonoran desert) where the Inchworm Drive, the ship's "heart", was being tested. We were already past testing the Asymmetry Field itself. We had prepared to do it, after all, in the chaos of the military cleanup of the Clamps, before anyone could regulate anything about doing it, while the eyes of the world were still blinking and adjusting to the basic premise of aliens. As far as actual caution was concerned, the safety checks mandated by Meteorology (as I understood them) eclipsed anything Earth's governments would ever think to come up with. Halation's ship had demanded a complete database of all chemical compounds ever recorded on Earth, a statistically random sampling of DNA across all major groups of Earth life, average readings of fundamental forces across Earth's surface, and a bunch of



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23E
2026END1
J12NW
0N12
VR10NV
WVENV
D0GOVE
E1
FVBOVE
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LEWBOV
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things I had not realized Azoth's huge surveillance satellite network (something I'd gotten sadly too comfortable thinking of as hypothetical) was recording to certify Earth as a safe location to activate a Weak Asymmetry Field, even though the technology was based on fundamental physics that operated the same almost everywhere in the known universe, and its compatibility with that underlying physics could be expressed in a single elegant mathematical function. I had already seen most of the footage in this montage through 3D videoconferencing in which Halation through me scrutinized and directed their literal every physical move (they had tried to get a direct bond but we weren't biting that). Chalk markings on the floor marked spatial variations of local objects (cinderblocks, motorcycles, fuselage, water tanks, explosives, piled up against one wall) in low-power microsecond tests fine-tuning the precision with which it would have to determine its Mean Surface Asymmetry at incredible levels of power. We'd had to whip up in a lab the kind of material that would support the form of superconductor necessary - what looked like a transparent plasma tube wrapped around itself in folds like a brain.

The ship itself, on the other hand, I'd barely gotten a chance to see. It was tastefully clitoral, more tasteful-



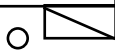


ly than most rockets are phallic at least; sweeping curved lobes forming a convex V, an ovoid dome for the bridge (detachable) raised lightly at the top where they meet, wrapped around a broad oblate tube that would carry a small fleet of terrestrial aircraft and mechanical facilities to modify them for unfamiliar atmospheric conditions. I had approved it in wireframe, but now the cladding shone white and featureless on about 65% of the surface.

“You’ll notice a lot of the workers on screen are Chinese,” Bennett-Fog began. “It’s not just because they’re the ones who can build something this fast, although it helps. America...”

“...doesn’t want any testing until they’ve done their own safety checks on the designs. They’ve told me directly.” I had been talking to people ten hours a day all week, embassies, brass, carefully vetted journalists, CIA slimeballs, the Prime Minister of freaking Canada. “I didn’t tell them we were testing already, but if there’s a way we can make it look like a mistake, then - won’t they see it’s already working and safe? Or do they have some ulterior motive with this?”

“It’s literally the longtermists in the Space Force, who I’d commend except they never actually wargamed for



aliens so I don't want to be beholden to them on anything," Bennett-Fog groaned. "And of course the other tech companies that don't want Azoth to get a big advantage before they can lock down a contract or copyright deal. That's probably the more important part."

"Big Existential Risk," Beek nodded without a hint of irony, although from what I'd seen that meant a completely different thing in his videos than how our self-appointed nerd-of-all-trades was using it.

"I'm more worried about the Expedition Force bidding system," I redirected. "That shit looks like a university portal, can't we just make something in-house? The Russians think it's rigged against them."

"Ignore it," said Beek. "I'm bringing my own people. We don't need a bunch of teachers' pet spec ops out there."

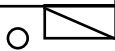
I'd been seeing more and more of them in the last few weeks: wearing the standard issue Edison Lens white meditation pyjama things they gave their workers privileged to use Plastic Beach, but obviously not Plastic Beach employees, big and oily-locked or with ruddy beta retriever college hockey faces, or cartel tattoos, or giant



rolexes, or guns I'd only seen in video games. A guy with a crucifix surrounded by runes tattooed on his collarbone and a guy with horn-stump forehead implants and a split tongue stood and bellowed at each other in the middle of the third level cafeteria and had to be held back from clashing with tables. I'd asked Jax about them because I'd seen him shadowing groups of them in the halls exactly like he'd shadowed groups of cooler kids in high school, but like those they didn't seem to be telling him much of anything. They had a particular kind of taciturn boisterousness where they wouldn't acknowledge you were there until it was to treat you as if you had not only been there all along but known them your entire life, but only when they wanted to. That, I supposed, settled who they were, although I'd been basically sure anyway, so I hadn't bothered to ask.

"I'll remind you," the acting director of Edison Lens, a skeletal looking boomer with a bowl cut and an Eastern European name I always forgot, "we have our own psychological assessment, that we'll be running against all candidates selected by the bidding system."

"I'm not entirely confident it outperforms human intuition with a large enough training set anyway," Ben-



nett-Fog shut her superior down. I hadn't assigned her a role in the Expeditionary Force yet, but she clearly didn't think of herself entirely as part of the Edison Lens hierarchy any more; her role couldn't be reduced to anything formal any more, and she knew it; she was part of this table, part of first contact. And although I didn't trust her, I couldn't help but see her the same way.

"Training set," Beek sighed. "Is that what we're calling my life of service and adventure now? The friends who've died in my arms, the meals I've eaten from the knapsacks of corpses? A training set?"

"Well exactly." Bennett-Fog sat up straighter but didn't permit any other sign of discomfort or apology. "Our own assessment is graded by an AI model against a training set, but I've said before its vector space is probably very narrow compared to human experience - particularly in the emotional vectors."

"Even if humans store a huge vector-space in their experience, they don't actually access much of it in forming a first impression, and emotion blocks it out by being hyper-selective, rather than improving it," argued the voice (before you start working up your most pinched and rubber-squeaky nerd impression in your head, it's the



smoothest, deepest voice in this room, enough to tickle my long-dormant bisexuality, but only just tickle). Edison Lens' tech liaison with Azoth. Ponytail weaving through the back of his chair down to his hips, prematurely receding hairline on a face that still looks freshman. Yaoi jaw, patches of subtle stubble from an uneven shave, wireframe aviators. His chosen name is, not making this up, "Alex Ghost" and I have to make sure Alastair never finds out about him at all costs. "Leona you'll appreciate this - as I do - because it's the reason stereotypes are so sticky. I'm citing a specific paper but it's also just trivial Bayes..."

Beek shrugged, but Bennett-Fog looked at me. "I don't trust either that much, so I'll sit this one out." I glanced back at her.

"You can run the assessment on my recruits too," Beek added. "My point is more that we should be moving fast. Like as soon as that ship is ready, we head out."

This time he looked at me with a sickly expectation of complicity. This he had talked to me about - in the private gym where I was training both basic combat requirements and testing the limits of Halation's symbiotic assistance. And I wasn't - we weren't - unsympathetic. Halation wanted to get back to the front as soon as possi-



ble. The longer we waited, the higher the chance someone else in the galaxy found out about us and started preparing. And on Earth... it wouldn't hurt to have more time to set things up, maybe find more reliable people to run my networks. But the reason the US government was so intent on dragging things out was obviously to figure out ways to contain us. My leverage in this situation came from the element of the unknown, of surprise.

"That could be as soon as a week," Artjoms (I remembered it!) fretted.

"Well then. Do you want my boys to start running those psychological tests?"

"We hadn't even decided what to call it."

The creative work, I was discovering, really did take longer than the practical work half the time - at least if you allowed yourself to think about it. All my ideas were references to Mai's stuff but that would be a step further than even the suits. All Beek's ideas sounded like boats out of Hornblower and all the ideas from Edison Lens were as cringey as you'd expect. Halation had great ideas but too many of them, and almost too abstract to sell anybody on - Bell, x. I stared into the margins of my vision, and didn't





focus in on the face that was starting to move:

"From his place rose Hiawatha,

Bade farewell to old Nokomis,

Spake in whispers, spake in this wise,

Did not wake the guests, that slumbered.

"I am going, O Nokomis,

On a long and distant journey,

To the portals of the Sunset.

To the regions of the home-wind,

Of the Northwest-Wind, Keewaydin.

But these guests I leave behind me,

In your watch and ward I leave them..."

But I recognized the voice. I've already mentioned it, and I'm not gonna do that again.

Luckily Ghost is actually indigenous. I've heard

UVCIG121
AET
TUCN2
UCCNM2VM
WUECEM02
N1NE8BV
COMWODD
B12N2
EBV01DV
N1BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B2NM
0N12
W10N0
WUECV
D0G0VE
EL
T0B0VE
W1 N1
TWC1D1D0
LEW0B
E1N2W0D
2ED D0
WE E111
W01B12C1
1NB
COM2EC1E
WUE1
211
D0G0B
1B2NM
T0BEM



a bit of his story at bar nights - orphaned from the Saint Regis Mohawk reservation, referred to Edison Lens as a 16-year-old hacker who had built his own improved SETI@home architecture and run it on a massive botnet across the Northeast by the retired CIA guy whose foster home he was living in. If you think given that it was weird for him to be citing the Longfellow poem instead of the story of the founding Iroquoian chief and peacemaker directly, you have to understand he's also a weird hyper-libertarian who exaggerates the throughline from Iroquois to American democracy and liberal values. (To be honest he makes a plausible case the people I learned from in college were exaggerating the opposite but I have to double-triple-check against anyone here rubbing off on me and that's a bad sign.)

"One of my favourites in school," Beek reminisced, eyes closed.

"They didn't teach it by the time I got there. Not woke enough, sir." He always got like this when Beek addressed him directly, which was barely ever. "I read it in the classic literature textfile from an 80s BBS, sir."

"What's your point?"



“Hiawatha. I’ve been thinking of the name since I heard what was going on, sir.”

A smile spread slowly across Beek’s face, and my own, if you’d taken a picture of it, must have been somewhat, manic equivalent. Yet another one of those spurs of exquisite cruelty lying around the floor of this project that I sort of just had to leave there because they summed up its contradictions so perfectly. Any reason to deny it would feel like denial of at least one of the contradictions of what I was doing, in whichever direction.

“As always, the decision rests with the commander.”

“Give me... a while to think about it.” At least I could run it by Mai.

But that evening I did something else I’d been putting off for more than a week. I sent a message to Jax through the second Clamp network.

I’m ready to approve your idea.

Reply “yes” and you will be from that moment major lieutenant of the secret military order “Rho Aias”,



loyal against all other orders to myself-and-Halation acting in accordance as one being, and sworn to protect us against all other orders even as separate beings. You will receive orders from us only through this network. You will identify worthy candidates for recruitment to this order from among the other recruits, and submit them to us for approval. Recruits to Rho Aias will be added to this network.

If asked to choose between our relationship as brother and sister and your duties in this role, you will choose your duties.

I clutched my phone to my chest and lay stiff in my bunk for about half an hour with no idea what he was doing. Hopefully considering. Halation circulated around my body massaging me into a rhythmic peace that contained the breaking tides.

The contrast of rhythms reminded me of a particular noise show I'd seen in my first week with Mai.

Halation, I won't have anybody now.

I'm sorry, I know but I'm not even sure what it means to have you.



>yes

>*I have to reply to that without any other shit right*

>*so now that I've said it*

>*I'm not kidding I think I needed something like this*

>*I've talked about it with Alastair, more seriously
than you probably think*

My fingers kept twitching over the reply you
should have been talking about it with me

Instead I typed: you know that isn't reassuring

you shouldn't be doing it because you 'need' it.
nobody ever knows what they need. you should be doing it
for the mission.

>*nobody ever does anything for that either*

>*and isn't the mission about balancing what you
think everybody needs, which is even harder*

*ok even Halation thinks that was a good answer. that
helps*



*>don't just test me with stuff like that because you're
my sister and worried about me either*

*look tbc. I wouldn't be even considering this if you
hadn't been pretty reliable through this whole thing.*

*>I think I might be good at it. I think I just might be
bad at everything else*

>but also like who else would you be considering

*>you don't need to pretend you have more options
than you do*

*that's probably true. anyway your first orders are to
run the recruitment script on the chatbot Alastair's training 100
times a day and don't try it on anybody IRL until you can do it
without getting caught five days in a row.*

and until we're in space

which don't tell anybody this but

might be sooner than you've been thinking

so get ready for that too

By the time the final Drive came to Plastic Beach



- not the same one I'd seen in the video, they'd had to make sure they could repeat their success, and when I looked inside the crate they'd hoisted on deck from a nondescript barge indistinguishable from the ones that visited regularly for repairs, it was about three times larger - we had established that I would travel on the cruise that would take it to the launch site, and probably wouldn't come back.

Azoth had rented a cruise ship to transport us. By this time Beek had assembled a brigade of about three battalions - 3000 men, and they were almost all men, the ratio even worse than if we'd waited to select regular soldiers - although he managed to scrape up a squad of Gaddafi's former Amazonian Guards somehow. ("Yeah, it blows that there isn't really a Revy or Koko Hekmatyar in real life," Jax commiserated. "I guess you get to be first.") Alastair dragged along a whole troupe of influencers, and even Mai brought a couple of SF trans girls she'd met on shore trips to rooftop parties and raves. I didn't ask questions about their relationship. Supposedly Hiram Ogier himself was somewhere on board but he was elusive - even Edison Lens didn't know where he was.

We still weren't publicly acknowledging the



Drive, but certain backchannels had confirmed the government knew we had it - had spies in the testing facility the entire time. I took this to mean their bids for a regulatory agenda were mostly theatre, meant to satisfy the same people pushing them - in particular a wide swathe of the Republican Party and grassroots conservative movement. An elected congressman had shared a video claiming Halation and myself were the Beasts from the Sea and the Land in Revelation respectively. The comments under videos of the Asymmetry Field over Montana were full of anecdotes about mysterious cancer cases.

It was a week's cruise to Uraniborg, which surprisingly hadn't been built that close to Plastic Beach (Ogier could jump between the two in his private jet if he wanted), being instead located on the prime equatorial real estate of Isla la Tortuga - no relation to the more famous Tortuga - off Venezuela. After Azoth had helped broker the transfer of power following Maduro's suspicious retirement, forcing the "coalition" between liberal and Chavist factions with their infamous shutdown of services, they had been granted the whole territory for the spaceport they'd been hyping for years, although it still wasn't as perfectly outside national jurisdiction as Ogier had wanted and achieved with Plastic Beach. Come



to think of it, hadn't Waldo Beek been involved in that too?... Uraniborg was a good couple hundred kilometres into territorial waters - as I had understood it so far, that was actually better protection against international interference than the total independence of Plastic Beach had been. Since the regime change, the Bolivarian Republic had positioned itself as a kind of neutral party between superpower blocs; maintaining its unilateral control of key resources while liberalizing markets so rapidly no one was left out or favoured.

We sailed through the Panama Canal and I barely looked out the window. Where we were going, this was like stopping at a motel. It felt pre-emptively ridiculous to try and muster enthusiasm for famous sights, although I let Halation pilot my body wherever struck their fancy whenever we got shore leave, to the San Francisco zoo, across the Golden Gate bridge. (When we'd still been working on a months-longer timeline Alastair had been planning elaborate tours of New York, Tokyo, Shanghai...) The things I paid the most attention to on the trip were the constants, the colour of the sea (what constant? it was different every time I looked at it, I could look at it every day and it would never be the same), the ways the sun swung its pendulum blades across the sky.



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
HPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
D112
V110NV
WVENV
D10VE
E1
FVBOVE
W111
1WCID1D
1E1B1B
E112W1D
2E11D
W1E111
V11B12C1
111V
COM2EC1E
W1E11
211
D101V
112NW
F101V

It was harder to treat as a normal tourist cruise - even a last normal tourist cruise - because I kept being called in and briefed on what the Americans were doing.

As soon as it became obvious where we were going, Azoth's satellite network started showing a nearly constant rotation of ships leaving bases in the Caribbean, strafing the edges of Venezuelan territorial waters, particularly the North-East corner where Uraniborg was. A couple got close enough that we got reports, blurry drone footage, from Uraniborg. Then reports from the Venezuelan coast guard, that they were doing firing exercises. When they made contact, they said it was training to deal with an uptick of piracy. The last time pirates had been in the news was last year. Closer Azoth satellite views showed them shooting across the border, but not in ways we could prove without admitting the existence of the satellite network.

Thanks to my weeks of work, almost every government in the world had by now signed on to the agreement to support the International Interstellar Expeditionary Force, which involved submitting it to a new international governing body, the International Interstellar Relations Committee. This wasn't under the UN because not every-





one liked the UN - its security council had too many privileges, it had its own big unelected bureaucracy and there were too many memes about it taking over the world. I commanded the former, not the latter. This meant that decisions directly pertaining to the well-being of member nations or the Earth as a whole could not be made without the approval of those member nations or a plurality of them, unless it was a situation where snap decisions had to be made. The US had been trying to argue - although we had already started work before the agreement had been hammered out - that even developing the Weak Asymmetry Field before a regulatory regime was developed would count as such a decision. Most of the other member nations didn't agree since this would either mean US regulatory authorities imposing a framework on the whole world, or having to build a whole new international regulatory agency on top of the whole new international military.

It was, more widely, agreed upon that launching would require the IIRC's permission.

But the IIRC had no security council veto. At the end of the day, if everyone except the US decided to launch, we could still launch.

And when I thought about those Chinese work-



ers on the video again, workers who had been supplied through China's initial contribution of resources to the IIEF - while the US had largely supplied tech contracts - it started to make sense why they were helping us build fast.

In spite of everything, there was one tourist stop we had to make. The night before we were scheduled to arrive, we sailed through the strait of Maracaibo, just fitting between the enormous concrete struts of the bridge - a wonder of the world I'd never heard of, like highly specialized Lego pieces elevated to brutalist sculpture - and not pausing for the harbour or the rhythmically spaced layers of sandy or mud-red apartments or orchid-coloured steeples, kept going until the shores receded on either side of us and on into the middle of the lake, the rough rolled glass of its surface only slightly (perhaps delusively) more metallic and less crystalline than the ocean. It had been too dark to see anything for an hour when we saw what we came for. A patch of blue-purple light on the horizon that widened and narrowed and shifted from side to side like an uneasy sleeper. A hazy curtain with ragged edges, corroding and seeping away from flashes of acidic white. The ship slowed down but kept moving until we were close and adjusted enough to see shifting tracery in even the brightest vaults of cloud, and the reddish root-systems of



Catatumbo lightning reaching and just as rapidly recoiling from the momentarily silhouetted coastline.

It's adorable, Halation annotated my vision, and it struck me that when I described Yayaraya, or the cables of plasma suspending Halation's lost Reef in the eye of its storm, it hadn't even occurred to me to convey their scale, or I just hadn't known how yet.

But that was still better than the few strikes we'd seen from Plastic Beach, bedraggled snapdragons the optical equivalent of sneezes, a stab of static or a bulb breaking, and I grinned with the honest pride of a kid whose first crayon drawing had come out recognizable.

Mai, who was stiffly and sweatily holding my hand although neither of us could feel it and I only remember this now from Halation's perspective, said out loud - reluctant, I think, to use our shared channel: "I still think you should have shown them some really Earth Earth stuff - the Great Barrier Reef, a Gothic cathedral, a safari in the ancestral environment - and then visited the the Great Red Spot on Jupiter. Or the Dark Spot on Neptune. Or the hexagon on Saturn. I'd see the hexagon on Saturn."

"I'd be a bit scared of going through the black



cube portal, but I'd visit the hexagon with you," said Alastair, arms folded on the railing in a white techwear raincoat. We were close enough that we were getting whipped by curtains of dense mist at intervals of ten to thirty seconds. Despite this Jax was leaning on his shoulder in a huge grey college hoodie, trying to shelter a joint in his hands.

"You're not going." I realized how weird and authoritative that sounded. "Right?" She shot me an incredulous, curl-lipped facial gesture with Halation shimmering turquoise-through-lime across her eyes, and went back to improvising a song which Halation translated automatically into the Ahasurunu melody-language (she had only learned minimal vocabulary, any meaning still accidental) as something like polyp-intoxication-lilt-accent-angle-marrow-serration-medicine.

Only when a uniformed Edison Lens errand boy came shouting for us did we process the toneless churning that had been meshing with the background of soft rain and thunder. A Fernando Gómez de Saa class patrol boat had pulled up almost alongside the prow, and where the cruiser illuminated the water behind it, at least two Constitución class gunboats for security.



Waldo Beek was there when we unrolled the ladder to let a highly decorated officer in a Naval, not just Coast Guard uniform who spoke English like he was twisting a dagger on board. ““They’ve made explicit threats. We’ve been instructed to take you into custody until a new agreement is arrived at.”

“My plan,” I explained as levelly as I could to the officer with a knitted brow as we sipped black-thick yerba mate in a soundproofed conference room, “was to get to Uraniborg, test the drive on the ship - maybe even an off-planet test, we could circumnavigate the solar system in about an hour - and then resume negotiations with a stronger hand.”

“The rest of the IIRC has approved the test at this point - it’s just America trying to stall negotiations by claiming ‘existential risk’ because they won’t accept our proofs to the contrary,” Bennett-Fog added. “They’re inventing entirely circular doctrines out of thin air because they want to get overseers into our labs.”

“And is there a reason you don’t want overseers in your labs?” The general’s voice was icy.

“Well” - taken aback - “same reason you wouldn’t



want them in your oil refineries. Not to mention we'd have all the other countries to deal with."

"But you're not a sovereign nation. You're a company, that's already interfered with ours, and some rump of an organization attached to it. And that doesn't matter." He had been glancing at the other leaders, but now fixed us directly in the eyes. "If you grew up in Latin America you'd understand it doesn't matter if their doctrines are invented or circular or what. You're playing, what do you call it, chicken, and you don't have a very big car. Even if you have a spaceship."

I knew this. I'd spent all this time positioning myself to be here because I knew this. And yet, my face felt like an overheating bulb and a cold sweat couldn't cool it down. The heat wasn't coming from my skin but my skull.

I reached for Halation, only to realize they weren't the calm one this time. In fact, I could feel their network vibrating all through me, like my spine trying to squirm out. I touched my ears, nostrils, for a second, to make sure nothing was flowing out of me.

What's wrong, you know this too, don't you?



*Not like this - not on a planet that can just - blow
itself up if the balance of power wobbles a bit -*

You've seen homes blow up -

My body almost fell to its knees.

You think that makes it better?

And I had seen homes blow up too. I had this sudden intuition that it was all the same at scale, which somehow made it harder to accept, not easier. I was back in the silence and light after Delilah - waiting for it to change in its absolute regularity that could be broken down infinitely and never constitute a moment that would be any different, waiting for Sophie's voice to cycle in and out of the slamming open-shut doors without grasping any words. Grasping only the empty form of time, time absolutely emptied - and in Halation there was not even light in this time - black space in all directions, black-cold - empty the same thing through the various sensors of the ship Halation's senses were connected to, and a constant tumble of thoughts and images that couldn't impose themselves on it, unless they chose to block out their senses entirely which they couldn't do because even the world of their inner projector would feel flimsy, about to cave



in, scratch any detail and uncover the roaring vacuum of the world that wasn't there. Better for that world to have stars - other homes, that might be safe, that might still be saved, as long as they would never be more than points on a sensor.

Better for that world to have stars. Well, if that's what you decided.

I checked how much time had passed on the faces around me. Waldo Beek was grinning in a way he must have been coached never to do on video.

"Of course it doesn't matter. So what do you propose we do? We're not expecting you to do all the heavy lifting. We've already got more combat experience on this ship than you probably do on this base."

"Unfortunately, that's not the kind of battle they're preparing for."

"Why would we do what they're prepared for? A few years ago, you used to hear a lot about piracy in off the coast of Venezuela. In fact, if I recall, I ran some missions for your coast guard."



The officer slammed his fist on the table, all the more frighteningly for the fact that he genuinely didn't seem aware of it, his eyes not moving from Beek's at all. "Yes, a few months later those crews you captured were released and all joined the protests. I seem to recall your own exploits better than you do."

"You're not complaining about the government you pledged loyalty to, are you? Depending on how things go once we've established our foothold in the galaxy, we could get you another one. The Americans are here because they're scared of us. When's the last time you had a chance like that? Just get us to Cumaná - they still have a port there."

"Should we" - I was still sweating - "try and communicate with the Americans first."

"They say they're only doing a military exercise," said the officer, stony-faced. "With missiles that would be capable of hitting Uraniborg without actually entering our territorial waters."

Beek laughed drily. "And give them the idea they can reopen settled negotiations this way? I thought you were smarter than that."



“The negotiations aren’t settled. We need them to launch anyway. They might be preparing for an unannounced launch, since we were testing behind their back.”

“If they’re spying on us they know we aren’t planning that. They want to establish a veto like they have at the UN. Didn’t you write a whole paper on how the security council veto prevented the UN from fulfilling its stated mission?”

“The farce of Waldo Beek explaining post-colonial theory to a graduate student isn’t giving us confidence in anything that’s going on here.”

His goading was so much like my father’s but so practiced it made my father’s seem pathetic in retrospect. “Yes, and I’m the one who insisted we not give them a veto power in designing the IIRC. I’m not about to back down from that. What I want is to force them to own up to what they’re trying to do...”

“‘Post-colonial’. You think you’re special.” The voice from behind me, as dissociated from my model of the space I was in as a ghost, sent a chill down my spine. The locked door had opened, soundlessly, without any hint of approval to enter. Glancing at the faces around us, only



Bennett-Fog was unsurprised.

Hiram Ogier was standing directly behind me, sunglasses on indoors, staring at the ground and thereby avoiding eye contact with the officer whose face was stretched motionless over a seismic upheaval.

“Ants have colonies.”

“That’s an analogy that obviously comes from humans, not the other way -“

He put his hand on my shoulder and it felt like he must have hit some sort of pressure point. “Most of humanity throughout history has lived in a colony of somebody’s. If you make your definitions consistent, all. The structure of authority is fractal, and latent in the dynamics of information, and extends throughout reality. We are already colonized by things we do not know, and our friend Lillywhite’s discovery has only proved this. There is one way to escape it, and that is to worm through the layers to the top. If you care about what you claim to care about you will help us do this.”

Bennett-Fog wiped her forehead. “I mean, that’s a simple way of explaining it, but Edison Lens has models



I've suggested before you look at that show."

"You could devolve Uraniborg back to us, and let them hit it." The officer snapped us back to reality. "Then they would be openly breaching both international law, and the newly formed IIRC doctrine."

"The resources and work we'd lose..." Caroline bristled.

"Are as nothing to what we have, and what we will soon." Ogier nodded.

Halation had carved out a bubble of quiet within me. They literally weren't hearing anything. They were modelling something I couldn't quite see. In turn, I didn't say anything as the argument raged on, focusing on processing anything they'd need to know and dismissing anything they didn't. I was breathing steadily in and out. It seemed stupid, I thought in the voice of Halation, although Halation was occupied inward and not watching myself from the outside with me, that I looked like the one taking this worse and less seriously, as voices raised and overlapped. Sweat was streaming down my face in rivulets and no one looking at me could tell how little it mattered, the friction between the hot air whipped in weary circles



around the room by plastic fan blades and the grinding matryoshka layers of thought inside the shadowy force field that was my body. Surely the reason humans fought so much was that they couldn't communicate their thoughts fully yet didn't stop communicating to think them either? Just to keep them nervous I let Halation extend rainbow veins up and down my skin with my breathing, lapping up the sweat where it touched them.

"We don't have to lose any of it. They don't understand what a Weak Asymmetry Field means still if they think they can threaten us."

We turned the cruiser back, not to the port at Maracaibo, but all the way back through the strait and up to the naval base at Punto Fijo, a scrubby, striated peninsula where I walked with Halation for hours outside the base, the sort of very Earthy Earth place I think Mai meant, although Mai never came with us. She hated it there - I think she felt even worse about being there than I did. I didn't even think on the walks. I didn't strategize. I had to get used to just moving in it. This miasma. More disorienting than the Weak Asymmetry Field. Is there a Strong Asymmetry Field? Or is the name free? - It's a weapon of mass destruction, it was quarantined by the Meteor-



logical Synod, no no no it's the last thing you want to be thinking about right now - It probably helped to think about things like that, but I didn't want to just lacerate myself either. I wouldn't be able to do this every time. I would get distracted wondering whether my decision was sound, but I couldn't think about it directly half the time, it was too raw, and I knew it was more or less taken care of without me anyway and I didn't have much to add, that my mere arbitrary knowledge alone had been enough to make me a "leader" while the experienced led the fishing boat that had puttered up to the base in the middle of the night on a bristle of wavelets like crocodile scales, lowered the invaluable folded crystal onto the aluminum raft roped behind it under a black cloth tarp. The pirates looked more normal than any of Beek's recruits (although not that unlike some of Edison Lens), dads with their stretch-marked bellies poking out of gym class pinnies and Caribbean baseball team hats, barely ever looking at us.

After midnight when they moved I'd check in on them over an encrypted videoconferencing system developed by Azoth, with an Edison Lens translator. A squadron of Beek's mercenaries were tracing them along the shore, prepared to engage if another faction of the Bolivarian Navy or hidden Americans intercepted them, and if not



to pile onto boats themselves in Cumanà, forming part of our unofficial fleet. There they waited and gathered forces from the surrounding villages for the Americans' next perigee with the maritime border, while the Venezuelans scudded back and forth to Uraniborg fitting it out with their cutting-edge Millennium CIWS systems. In the mornings, looking like someone was holding a gun to my head and figuring the look helped my case, I stalled for time in the elliptical, passive-aggressive language I knew from years of watching geopolitical standoffs play out across drip-fed quotes and analysis videos, unfortunately including Waldo Beek's, realizing with dread that there wasn't much more to it after all and they were just like me clueless spectators who had to weigh their interpretation of vague bullshit against the risk of hellfire before they were dead. I made it seem that the preparations for resistance were entirely Venezuela's, in the inalienable interest of their sovereignty, and that in the meantime I didn't want to force anyone else into anything and would do my best to comply with any demands they made, but in the interests of the rest of the IIRC they would have to make them out in the open.

On the last night I followed along their stream from setting out to mission accomplished, switching perspective to one of Beek's boats where I could at least follow



2'
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVIDW
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
D012
VR10W
WVWV
D070E
E1
FVBOKE
W1 N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D070V
1B2W
F0BEN

the banter (and Jax seemed to have made friends). I didn't have the right kind of presence of mind to participate, but I was able to pull the things he said next to me out of context and hold them. He'd wanted to go, but he wasn't even officially enlisted yet. They passed close enough to Uraniborg to see its cold spotlights strafing the waters, emulsifying half-translucent clouds against the pixel-charred background of the sky, but kept going. As they got close to the border they turned the motors off, and rowed, while raising canvas on sticks at complex angles around the boats to throw off radar. They did get caught eventually - a warning flare going up on the horizon and everyone collapsing folds away from guns and scrambling - but they were close enough - just within 5000 metres. I switched feed to the boat that was carrying the Inchworm Drive, which had been charged at the power station at Carabobo. At that point visual streaming became unreliable - the sailors got quieter as they tried to parse the inconsistencies in what they were seeing - parts of the sky looking different every time they blinked without any fluid throughline of motion, superpositions - different brains corrected for it different ways, but most were advised not to look outside the boats too much. In another room of the base Edison Lens was getting reads of the water disturbances as the Inchworm Drive (hooked up to a minimal navigation system hacked





from a Gamecube controller) pulled them, at a speed of 400, 500 knots, through the water, along with the ships that occasionally sprayed the waters around them, their radar producing illegible results as they tried to make sense of why it seemed like they were getting closer to their targets at the same time as their targets were getting closer to them. The displacement of matter around the edges of a Weak Asymmetry field, the Metasymmetric Obverse recalculating the laws of physics from end to end, was the part the Americans claimed to be concerned about as an “existential threat”, although a field whose Obverse was malfunctioning would simply static out under the accumulation of unbalanced calculations (releasing the considerable energy going into maintaining it, but that would just be like, a very large conventional bomb). Still, a crude Asymmetry Field in the middle of a continuous complex fluid was guaranteed to create some strange kinds of turbulence, and the same would likely go for our atmosphere. As much as anything else about this plan I was worried about causing some huge fish die-off to wash up along the coastline. The only thing we noticed, though, was the whales. A whole pod that had been sitting around in the deepest areas on Uraniborg’s sonar, when the vibrations drew near, spontaneously split into two groups, one of which sounded and the other which tried to make contact



and swam away.

And then I got the link for Uraniborg's cameras. The shrinking, brightening conch-shell of blacklight fade on the horizon was surrounded by overlapping ripples of white foam, like an uncanny birth of Venus. Our fleet was just about close enough for them for them to start firing by sight, but suddenly the Millenniums were strafing their own decks. As they exchanged fire with their original target, they tried to retreat, realizing how fucked they were. They couldn't explain why or even how they were suddenly in Venezuelan territorial waters. The Bolivarian Navy had been scrambled. The only serious explanation would prove beyond the shadow of a doubt to the rest of the world that their concerns were unfounded. And mercenaries more hardened than anyone they'd had on board in fifty years were coiling grappling ropes around the railings.

In a moment of weakness at 2:00 in the morning, I called my dad. He slept with a bulky grey phone and a lukewarm Irish coffee next to his bedside, always ready to pick up and respond to a desperate client. When he picked up he didn't respond to a word I said except to let me finish and let himself forget I'd finished, and I was





half grateful to give up trying to say anything. He sounded rehearsed, still stumbling on his lines, but in a way where he had to have them written out better somewhere, even if not in front of him, even if deleted:

“All I can say about what you’re doing is, I wouldn’t be doing it. I’d want to do it. You have no idea how much I’d want to do it. But I couldn’t do it. I’m not sure if that means anything to you now, or ever would have, or how much choice you even have in any of it. But I couldn’t do it. And that includes what you’ve already done. So if my... son ends up dooming humanity, I guess that’ll be pretty funny. And if you don’t, I hope it’s because of something I did, or showed you. I’m good at talking to idiots, and I’m good at talking to hardasses. That’s two things I bet you’re gonna have to do a lot of, and thank God you’ll have some men like Waldo Beek” (I had never heard him once mention Beek before, I wondered if he’d gone down the rabbit hole since the announcement) “who are even better at it than me. But honestly... I don’t know how to talk to you now, because it seems like you’re a different kind of idiot and a different kind of hardass than I thought. And so is Jax...” here it seemed like he went off script, and broke into a gnashing whisper-shout like he was trying to keep his teeth clamped shut against his own tongue: “Fuck fuck



you fuck you fuck you send him back and tell him to respond to our messages I don't care if he wants to go I don't care if he's old enough he's a retard the army wouldn't let him in if he tried to join you're manipulating him you'd call that abuse or some shit if we did it you fucking sicko" - "or at least I hope. I hope you don't just think you are. God knows both of you have enough problems thinking you're things. I guess I shouldn't say that. I should say something nice or at least patriotic, something that makes you want to come back here for dinner some night when you're back and have crazier war stories to tell us than I ever dreamed I'd hear from my own children. Well, good luck out there. We love you. And if I have to mop your mother up off the floor every goddamn day for much longer" - I started to force out a word in edgewise, and before I knew what it was, he hung up.

The first images of the surface of an exoplanet, the bookend to what will seem a brief cosmological interregnum since 1967, will not arrive on Earth before this text, but in the meantime you must have the first video of a Weak Asymmetry FTL launch, which I can only imagine from what Halation plays through my mind to as I go to



sleep. There will be video from dozens of angles all over the news, but I prefer to construct it through your eyes, on board Edison Lens' VIP farewell cruise, the spray of noise from Alastair's hot tub party (popping bottles, screams escaping human emotion into seabird register, verses of The Final Countdown) misting your hair and shoulders. A bookend, perhaps, to the star I saw that night, falling: the flower you saw that night, rising. My prayer, your fear. My fear, your prayer. (I need a better word than "bookend". On Contemplation, there is an entire artform dedicated to curating such symmetries, transmitting the neural state of imagining them in superposition.)

By now everyone had connected the grainy videos of a blob of vomit-green light wavering like an electric fireplace on the horizon over rural Montana, or a sinister spiky photonegative cutout on the Caribbean horizon, to what was going on. This wasn't that. It wasn't even one of the cinematic-quality deepfakes that touched it up with a sharp discrete halo or procedural shimmer.

The Hiawatha's Asymmetry Field was, obviously, much larger, and at its centre, brighter, but also simpler, as it wasn't directed by a semi-conscious ship, and quite simply far cruder in components. (Halation's was, of course,



on board.) Instead, it looked like a circle of overlapping circles, within concentric circles, within overlapping, within concentric... it spread from the fanning light-cones and glittering scaffolds of Uraniborg, until its faintest iterations seemed to encompass the whole sky. Their colour a pale blush, almost lilac. The water taking up the other half of the tableau remained black and impassive; nothing reflected off it, as if it wasn't really light, though if you looked down closely you might pick up a wavering white circle on the surface of the water almost reaching the prow of your ship before it disappeared. The centre overlapped and brightened until the shape of the Hiawatha was barely visible except as a kind of sigil in negative space, then the whole field rearranged itself in a split second around a circle above, then two circles above, then four, the rearrangements of the whole array accelerating until it began to diminish in the sky, momentarily a Dantean rose the size of a harvest moon, then a point of light among the stars, then an exhausted sky, scraped almost clean of cloud.

Night after night, I imagine what you would have done next. I like to hope you had a melody in your head; whether you stood there humming it, or opened up Fruity Loops on your phone; I hope you interpreted it, the way





you always could text but occasionally pictures too. We talked a few more times on Plastic Beach but I never heard any music if you were making any. You could give me uniforms, you could give me a flag (although after the events of our arrival we'd settled on the good old-fashioned Jolly Roger over any of your designs, which all felt like those sand paintings that left out one element so as not to summon too powerful magic) but you could never stoop to giving us an anthem. But this wouldn't have to be that. It wouldn't even have to be a farewell.

Really not much to say about the voyage itself. Weak Asymmetry means none of the clumsy hijinks of space suits and zero gravity, just being stuck inside for weeks. The ship barely even had porthole windows, which would have been both a pointless defence liability and more disturbing to look at than mere void. I only knew where we were by the navigation program, and that didn't mean anything to me. We didn't get to play around in zero gravity, but we did get to eat boring space food Edison Lens had synthesized (had already been producing, in fact, since the Cold War) for maximum storage efficiency. It felt more than anything like living in a nuclear bunker.



It wasn't the space that was inside Halation, but that was there, inside me, and I sat with my empty stomach to get used to it.

Food was an obvious worry pertaining to the whole expedition, but Halation had told me the place we were going was the best place to start for that. The Towers (which the inhabitants of Towers were also called) were famous for their portable manufacturing and agriculture tech, due to "the whole deal with their planet". Towers, I was informed, was fragile - the whole crust had been cracked like an eggshell in a misguided attempt at expanding it in the early days of geoengineering and Weak Asymmetry technology, and the planet now resembled a giant pumice stone, with its labyrinthine geology constantly shifting, subject to cave-ins and eruptions and simply crumbling overnight.

But the bridge did have a big wraparound "window" that was actually a screen projecting "footage" generated by artificial intelligence based on the Metasymmetrical Obverse calculations, which acted as the ship's ultimate "sensory system". Its light was still too pixelated and dull to have the aching cold precision of stars the way I'd look up at them with Mai, and Mai not here to make





any sense of them, but I ran up there the moment I heard on the intercom we were within deceleration range of the planet. Even though the deceleration still took three days to coordinate, I barely left the bridge except to sleep and eat meals. Bennett-Fog, I'm pretty sure, did sleep in there.

When I first stumbled in with my morning coffee to see the larger blurry-edged circle among the small blurry points on the display had expanded into a surface with features, Towers looked like the moon if it was made of blue cheese. A white-grey, lined and pockmarked and shadowed disc, its only hint of colour vague splotches dusted the blue of lichen or juniper. By the time we could see it like that we were hours away and everyone on the ship was getting ready to spend the next few hours burning through as much of our reserves, especially of alcohol, as we safely could before we fully understood what the Towers' technology entailed.

I gave a speech and no one was paying attention. Most of it meant less than anything I had said in public since high school. But there was this bit I think is worth recording: "I'm not sure whether our victory at Uraniborg is helping or hurting morale about our mission. I'm not sure whether it should be. The basic problem is, we beat



the most powerful army in the world with alien technology we've never used before, with a leader who's never commanded before. And now we're heading out to fight people with lots and lots more of it. In spite of this, we have significant advantages. As new as we are to any of this technology, we can look at it with new eyes. We can look at it and ask: how do we use it to kill things. How do we use it to secure positions. People have been doing that against the United States in particular for decades. China used gunpowder for centuries before anyone thought to use guns. Of course, this isn't an advantage that lasts. Everything we do our enemies will pick up how to do in months, weeks."

"And yet those few weeks of advantage lasted centuries for the conquistadors," Beek yelled from a crooked plastic table he was sitting at the head of, and cheers rose throughout the room (and a few guttural counter-bellows of indignation).

"That's the way I'm here to make sure we don't use it," I shouted back, but my words were lost in the enthusiasm. I paused to let them wear themselves out. "I brought you victory at Uraniborg, but if anyone still thinks I'm soft wait till I hear anyone has been massacring civil-





ians,” (there aren’t exactly civilians and soldiers in this war, Halation had explained to me, but that just meant I had to make calls based on the exact strategic situation on the ground, which I didn’t know yet) “or pressing labour, or... there’s probably nothing most of you’d wanna fuck down there” (“Bet!” someone yelled, but the response was mostly boos) “...because if you watched Waldo Beek he used to throw screenshots of the kind of nasty things people like me wanted to do to people who did things like that up on screen and hand wring about them, and I’ve never had a chance to until now. And I’m sure some of you want a chance to yourselves, with the things you’ve seen. My point,” they were quiet now, although that didn’t mean convinced, “was that within that window, we have to think. We need to make sure we understand what they can do to us, and they don’t understand what we can do to them. And whenever it looks like that advantage is slipping out of our hands, we have to think of something that’ll give it to us again. From hereon in, I’m doing that every waking second. And you will be too - or you’ll die really fast if you don’t.”

And then Jax raised a cheer for me, and invited me to his sticky-stained table, and introduced me to a bunch of people whose names I would get too drunk



to remember but wrote down on a slip of paper I hid in the cuff of my uniform to do background checks later on, and eventually for the first time in a month I witnessed something like dawn as the thin atmosphere of Towers began to glow turquoise around the edges of the screen. Eventually we all quieted down and stopped drinking as the planet's real surface became visible. Gnarled and looped shadows pointed away from stacked bubbles and roped filaments of stone, giants' causeways extending the length of Marianas chasms where the faint glow of magma breathed in the dark, straggling cliffs and sharded mesas projecting rows of chimneys like the pipes of an organ, every formation pockmarked with more holes the closer we got, swollen burls like owls' hollows or simply random gaps as if the texture of the surface hadn't been filled in. The faint lichen-splotches discernible in any more detail even at the point where geological formations were filling up the majority of our screen, a coiled chimney rising from the top of a terraced mountain on the edge of a gravelly, megastructural slope, suggesting the scale of these things relative to any conceivable life even before the chimney swallowed up the whole of the screen and kept going for ten minutes before we even entered it, and we gaped as the ragged layers of its esophagus descended narrower and narrower, until we finally reached a layer





of unnatural flatness, a heptagon of overlapping slabs of something that looked like porous concrete, across which the gap of which - just large enough for our ship to fit - flickered the glow of a plasma membrane - a Weak Asymmetry Field. Halation guided my hands on the keyboard of our control system, entering the code for the precise tachyonic vibration that would mark us as friendly. From there we descended what was unmistakably a tunnel, albeit a tunnel opening on other tunnels in every possible direction, a ribbon of open space winding through a dense foam of rock that shone black and sharp-toothed under accumulations of sediment. There was still almost nothing close enough to discern as life, except occasional strands of what looked like preposterously long chains of triangular blue-grey scales hanging out of crumbling vesicle mouths, but still not long enough to get a close look at at the rate we were descending. The Asymmetry Field in here, now that we had made the handshake, was aligning our gravity with the direction of the tunnel so we just had to drop towards the centre of gravity of the planet, and we did for almost half an hour, descending what on our systems read as almost a hundred miles before somebody pointed out a rain of boulders falling alongside us, and someone else spotted a pillar collapsing before it vanished offscreen. In here there was no sound, the sense we had all



learned to associate with this kind of danger before localized inconsistencies in flickering pixels, but soon readouts from the field itself, which was communicating with the one surrounding us and the whole tunnel, confirmed it. Rhythmically, like a drumbeat we couldn't hear, couldn't even visualize because we hadn't devised a readout for this eventuality, the chimney was shaking itself apart.



Name: Hexa

Sex: female

Occupation: feral Andro, dream-host

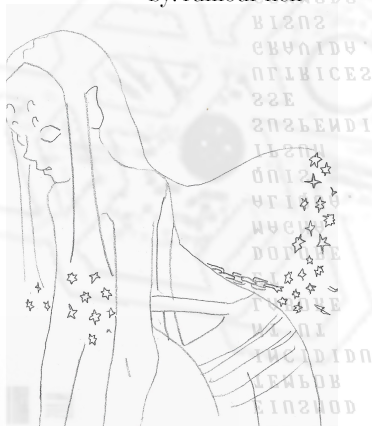
Likes: other churns

Dislikes: larval slavers, unwelcome ghosts

Blood type: ???



by: rumour hell



'I slip into we so swiftly was I ever here?'

Catch Chere at the mall with a deadcool mindfit and time to spare to look for the next sign. So not on-clock. She's gotten permish from her dream protocols to keep herself wired with stim today, but the way she'd crashed before she thought she'd deal with fallout for weeks.

Devon is a social vamp she'd picked up in a bar west of Orion Point, on-look with greasy forelocked hair and dead scene eyes. When those eyes are on her she's in a sweat, out



of her comfort zone, which is the point.

So when he'd ditched her to check out the latest emulsed dolls, she hadn't triggered his social to say, "actually, they're fully articulated motion figures." She'd just smiled, looked demure, and even when he was just a silhouette down the far walkway line, glassed in on all sides by fronts and facades fresh with graffiti marker, she hadn't induced wisteria but instead turned her own back. The Frost Giants she'd been seeing in panes of glass, in the whites of her own eyes.

She'd just cut her hair, yet to hit her eyes. In crisis sometimes, on the usual, she'd choked out the cramps of the black forest with the freezefurn of the Frost Giants under waning away from the wist, waxing into everything else. So the next sign hits as a girl staring at her with the eyes of Hecate, flowers crowning her rainbow hair.

She thinks, pretty good for post-Capricorn rebound. But if it's clear she's scoring into this girl's eyes just to check for the next guidance path it gets wonky. The Frost Giants have protocols against checking people for personal trips. There is dead cold running epsilon into what heaven or hell awaits.



"What're you doing here?" she says. Right hand path. Direct conflict and act like she knows. Deeper spiral into the traces of memory. She does know her, but not from outside herself. Knows her from the swim of holics that had been past the black forest. In the way she'd played with its rhythms like viola strings, stirring the notes in slow sojourn from the cruel silence.

Who you are could swim in slow journey from your core and spread through your skin as it grows.

"Trying a new skin," the strange girl says. "This is what I could look like if I could, but I'll forget soon. Overload warp sent me here to frame the stress. I'll forget that, too."

Chere has the impulse to set her cortisol to bleaching wakemode but all she can do to shut the scream down. Turn it into a steady pulse at least to find space in her breath expelled. With that comes the words. "Which one are you under?"

There's a bunch, she thinks. A different spin would swirl to a different coriolis. Penchant there for not knowing the right way to work the choker. Each facet holds glim-



mer veined down to the centre. She thinks, though, if she knows for sure, she can script it down the line, to make sure she never zones, fucks it up.

"All of them," the girl says, "I've been under all of them, their weight heavy and forever pressing. Forever crushing." And that's when Chere knows she's read it all wrong. She rolls her eyes skyward, in her thoughts to keep them from the heat, the awk steaming from the girl's shoulder-blades, rising in curls she can almost see. In herself, she knows, to keep them from the clasp on her neck, from the next dose. Bound to come in askew now, ill-timed, off the script, the one script that will take her where she wants to be.

There are so many doses, she thinks, so many scripts to worry about, and how will I know for sure if the signs aren't on me? If what's on me is like this?

So she leaves the girl alone. Still thinking about her later when she's still hiding out in the hypermall. From the cold outside. From the Giants. You can see them, of course, in the whites of your eyes, pale reflections in the glass.



You can also see them in the snow, when you're hitting heat dep, and when she talks about them with her sisters of social she says, they say: it's a frozen heart, is what it is. It's when it stops beating your eyes start burning dry.

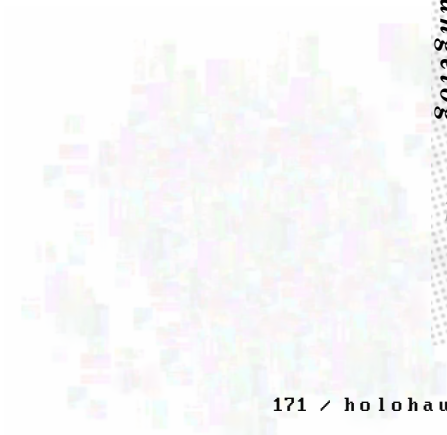
She thinks you could pretend, you could trick yourself. From there a short stop to tricking someone else. Puts that deep down. Hopes she'll forget, the way you can forget anything at all. Knows chances are it take root in the loam of her guts, from there flowers vines, tendrils. It does what it wants with her.

Never ends. The social vamp is on a line that buzzes when he hits her up. When she looks back the girl is gone, and by the sound of shrieking a few Ghouls have made it past the shutters. It's their shrieking, of course, in ghoultonge.

Something like: why am I here? I want to leave.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2AM
MPECENM2
ATUEBVV
COMMOD
B12N2
EVAVIDV
PTIVICE2
23E
202FENDI
1F2NM
0N12
VGI0NV
MVENV
DOGOVE
EI
TAVOVE
MI NI
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
EID2MOD
2ED DO
WE EGIL
VDIBI2CI
1NV
COM2ECIE
AMEI
2IL
DOGOV
1F2NM
GOVEN



changelog



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIGISI
TT
2
SVN
CIVS
BBV
COMMODO
BISGS
EVAIDV
DIVICES2
SEE
IBSN
ONIS
WIGONV
WACNV
DOGOVE
EL
GABOVE
MI MI
INCIDIDN
LEWOB
EINSMOD
SED DO
WE EGII'
VDIIBISCI
INB
CONSECIE
WMEI'
SII
DOGOV
IBSN
GOVEN





Last Time

Lesia awakens in a robotic body pursued by Recyclers, with no defense but her tactica; Chere dreams alone in her Habitex through the holic choker.



CW: robot trafficking, possession, unreality, mental attack, abstract trauma, subjective overlap, body modification, drugs, assassination, combat

(Σ)

VERSE 1.1

(THE STARPATHS)

When Hexa was nu she was bartered for use as swarmhost for a curation of ghosts, kept on leash plugged into a Cradle itself rusted, flecked with the rust in blushing streak trails. Her dreamings were the only format that could host them, and they were, her Andro keeper said, so many nu's that even slave life dreaming was a gift. Even dreaming hooked up.

She'd learned to screen out their buzz, the rushes of their thoughts like water, because paying focus kept the dream-

PUT YOU ON A NOTER (Σ)

0E1
TUCN2
VCCNM20H
WUECEM02
N10EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EBV01D0
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
120H
0012
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WUEEN
D0FOVE
E1
T0BOVE
W1 01
1MC1D1D0
LEWFOV
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE E011'
W11B12C1
10B
001
T0VE



loam stable, and they were designed to comment on your dreaming with semiotic strikes aimed straight at your mems. Which skinned that low is the raw nerve of your morassed apocheir. What carries over blooded and aching to listen to a handful of ghosts but they hadn't seen it coming when she'd stopped listening. Just screened 'em, even as they tried to juke her. So in the end they were telling her to do what she was already doing, and she was smiling as she did it. She'd found them, one by one, with their voices in her head the whole time. And by the time she had the dreaming had been 'clysmed, portals to Hell glowing aloft held by charred thermals and gasps of smoke in red skies.

When she had destroyed the foundation enough she had opened her eyes to her tortured frame, to the rusted Cradle she was plugged into. She'd bristled there, been ready to kill, but she'd been alone.

Unhooking herself had taken forever. She was glad of the chance to fade away, into BG with the blue rivers of the Veldt, BG with the other Andros. She had stopped being nu, and that helped; Recycler attacks waxing; she'd needed to defend herself. To at least grab a cloaker, have the 'ware to interface with it, if need be.



So now here she is with nothing, and something fucked in her apocheir from hosting those ghosts for so long. Zone klaxons set off, and she hears what is not yet technodeath but pure deathgrind, the riffs slamming into each other in their haste to escape the amps.

Not much, she thinks, you can do when the world swallows you into it, and then you subsume beneath it, fade, and all you've put into it was just a bearing. A signpost for later. When all your love is gone as all love goes and you are sundered to the next interface, next stitchwork of the starpathed seam. For Hexa saw the light leave the hosted karmals. Saw the ghosts in their temp-reprievied breath from their flux stop breathing.

In that moment she saw the starpaths. Saw them ossify with the weight of time and need even to the sequences that pulled her forward.

So she emerges she feels this legacy as someone's phantom limb moving, someone's phantom hand grasping. Even as she drags herself from where she found herself, where the Cradle is rusted char and the char covers the halls grey with phosphor lustre glimmering across in skips and beats. She guesses those glimmers are chafings of the scriptwork, of these ghost tapestries, though she has no



2
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
MPECENV2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B1202
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
VRIDNV
WVENV
DOGOBE
E1
TVCBOBE
M101
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
E102WOB
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOGOB
1B20W
ROBEN

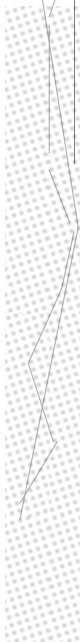
name for their weavers.

Still she has no value yet emerging rasa to halls of dark char. In fact, she's gone the other way; on some mathgrid somewhere latticed through the haptic swim, someone who cares somewhere sees it and thinks, slaughtered ghosts.

They were screaming, you can't do this, as if there was a reason. She hasn't left the zone yet and she means to en route around, keep tabs on the place, see who shows to check on her. Pay them back, she thinks, before they pay you back.

From there could be a stable loop she can pick up. When she thinks about it, though, the raw churn of amnione sloshes inside her, and her inner spoolings, glossed in coils against her chassis, tremble. So she drifts around a night skypainted with the Veldt in hot pinks shifting to orange, to green, to blue. The pixels dance along the Sealing in waves, ripple in layers, in wash across the surface molten with light like a sea of fire.

Mote dust grains the dark char, white swirling across in flecks and puffs. In it her eyes lose themselves, following the comet paths as her morassed apocheir pulls patterns from them. As if dreamt pattern, except even less real than





those, flickering in current beneath the char that is her tactica, that is the way her morassed apocheir will haunt her with loop probabilities, brightening to life, darkening to death.

Right now she has no name for that either. All it is, a fog of unknowing that cloys beneath the surface straying and strewn from the dark char of the hallgrid. She thinks so because it clings to the surface as if scared to sink, to lose itself in the nothing below the real. Upwards from the real can be divined but below you are scattered. Beneath the meaning of things, even beneath what meaning is scoured, translates from the origin cast.

It is bathed in bloom when it slips beneath the visualis, something worth reaching for to save. Too tempting. As she keeps her eyes on the Nodal that spikes itself into the hall with careless grace, spearing in black crystal to meet the diodes at the right angles for synthesis, she thinks, too easy to slip away from it. Her morassed apocheir festers, like black tar smearing across glass. She blots from herself.

Later she would know this as the apocheir seal spreading like moss across the parts of herself she could see. Later she would wish she could still see herself, that she could burn the shape of herself into her visualis. So it would rise



unasked for. Simmer in the haptic feedback which so far is primordial, virgin; herself, alone.

Still the haptics glimmer with naissant hope, bright light of potentia feeding the skeinic film, marking it from stillness. Whatever coils and pulses within her itself the spark the amniones feed from. Still the skeinic film glitters, each bubble cramped light breaking into clusters, blossoming white burn petals like a nuke cloud pluming.

When she trances into that she knows the starpaths want her somewhere else. She says to them, sounds like waiting for them to happen. The pure wash of swim over her is glyph-enmeshed static she can taste in her filings.

The starpaths say, you know all this is born again and born anew still. Still through time the way to alter loops is a gesture, a pattern. Stillness and silence the way to plait is to weave as all this was once once woven, translated straight by her morassed apocheir into haptic, silver as it flowers in the clear amnioneses and what was once woven weaves still as the threads tremolo, whisper whisper the wisp of movement across the taut.

She waits.





Thinks it over.

The tactica she'd fused to the real, but the morassed apocheir stirring had been something else. That had been some warping lunging straight for the marrow of her visualis. Trauma always some monster rising from the barrows of your spark, especially if you were an overloaded larval.

She says to them, "where am I needed?" Here the milk light is pale streaks and blanchings, swirls and twines plastered to the latticed architectura. The starpaths are fading the ancient Nodal she can see in its crystal creep out in her visualis, and that's when she knows it as concrete, as beyond her haptic river.

You are needed in the Clot. We will light the way.

I need to get them. They can't just make it.

In the Clot they will never find you.

Follow the starpaths, she thinks, that had blossomed into tactica so sharp, breaking in knives of light the chinks in it. She knows, slipping out of larval hiberna, acid vision on all things coming in. The real stained with pain and fear before she even got there.



Her amnioneses would be looking just to hold on.

Who are you? Legacy trails, she thinks, when they don't answer. Bleedthroughs from somewhere else. A soft touch when she'd needed one. Vacant of imprint into the real. Still coming out she's starving for any meaning at all. Any amnioneses will take the first thing that charges in, eyeing the fresh slate bed of rasa in the morass.

Doesn't even know what a star is.

What they are still carves space in fluid rivers, in trails of absence marking and drawing eyes that see and skin that feels. Somewhere. She thinks she's seeing, then, dreams of the Patrons, spaces like the Veldt that may hold other spaces still.

Is that worth it, she thinks, to flip the switch forever, on all this anger? Larval slaver. In the end all she does is put it on a noter she slips into her filekeep. Where the Nodal is and how to find it again. In the end she's traipsing out with the dim flare of the Clot on her HUD. Her visualis is ink-black, white contours carving themselves from it, like in the darkness her tactica is her lantern keeper.

Infused with the starpaths, here and there it sparkles ce-





lestial, glitter rings on waypoints, strobes beating through the architectura. She follows those lines first, trying to get them to agree, to chime in compliment when she decides where to go.

If they ever talked to her, though, they're silent now. She stares up at the screensky swimming with aurora, the Veldt in algo-gennered rainbows making its ethereal presence felt. Buzz and flicker, and in the end a static BG. So after a while, you get used to it.

Beyond this sky, she thinks, this stillborn Hub, beyond even the Veldt. That's where you'll find them. Co-existing. Holding steady and still. Still breathing, if they breathe. May as well never go nova for all the time they have.

The void left in her aches for them.





VERSE 3+4

MIRRA

With heart no, with not much you could call heart is Lesia struggling under the screensky breaking smoke sepia, the thrown clouds of the data clusters of the Veldt like Pisces rising, through her veils the dawn sipping. Double clip armata like sunshine, Lesia's smoke grenades, blossoming in effusion burn through the architectura's grounded grid. She'd set a bunch off just leaving her Nodal; when Pisces rises you'll know it by some good holic doses and that'll trigger something true in you. The sun that scars the sky now is tuned for the Veldt & the Veldt drinks it in.

Set them off because her tactica told her the technodeath was being DJ'd with too much skill this time. Would crest the blood pulse like a tidal wave for anyone looking to be in on the kill. In fact she wasn't sure she'd ever heard an anti-compose like this, the way the breaks are like swords bleeding the blastbeat's infinite font.

At the end of her tether and eclipsing in the alley slant a 'clysm of haptic churn with the stillvoid ribboned with smoke, she's down bad for a tactical cloaker or anything to swim the tactica from its death grip on the blanching





toxemia streaking through her mirra. The way the real refracts through the tactica to become visualis. The corrosion broken free from its apocheiring seal.

In the Chalk here the glass is frosted white which paints the pane lines and flushes the contours where here it frosts the grades with mañana; leave before it is rude, find that better tomorrow. So when she catches her stillness she thinks she has no future without it.

In the Chalk the Hub rivers run the walls like dogs in streams of blue light and she makes her way to the Silent Clot, where the Libra have set up their phase-Cradles but they are gone now; no longer in season. In Capricorn season I thought, moving too fast, slow down. Here where all the astrals dissolve and their stars churn. In Capricorn season they were all down bad for the astral psychics who played go on mindmaps that looked like unknown realms, like wizards throwing comets at her.

Here the Clot is ghosted and without pattern harmonics from Andros muted and dulled. Unclear promise they have made and patience pulses slow in fine threads of light, spooling themselves closer to where she stands on the gridbanks, as if she places herself here in their stead. Pixelfire marks the banks, spreading over the skin of the sur-



face, ripples with her weight.

The Clot will take what you give it. As if paths waiting to cross and in the knot bearing the promise the Libra made to them, to be back when there was no one around to give them shit. Skin into the Clot, they say you can swim the whole Hub, and be with the martyrs who chose it over the sky.

Which makes sense as it goes the void of dead nothing is a fire that burns haptic with the smoke the void ice here and she is encased, sculptured from her own cells clotting but the tactica pristine relies on zen as its base-line. Get slagged enough to discard and your morassed apocheir wants the easy way out. Cheer up, chin up, or you'll skin out from the bottom and when you make yourself at home in someone else's morassed apocheir you'll be so gross you won't have space for long. Soon you'll have too much of it, again and again.

All standing by the barren Clot tells her is that she doesn't have the time² for that. All standing by the barren Clot tells her us that the Libra aren't around.

"Paying customer," she says to the banks, to the nothing, to the no one. To the nesting sites that once held Cradles,





that will do so again, the moment she leaves.



LWCI121
WET
TWCN2
WCCN2W
WCECENW2
WICENW
COMMOD
WISN2
EWANIDW
WILWICE2
SSE
SWSLEWDI
WISN
WNI2
WICN2
WCEW
DOWBE
EL
TOWBE
WIL WIL
WICIDIDN
LEWFOR
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SED DO
WE ERI1'
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COM2ECIE
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SIL
DOWB
WISN
TOWEN





GLOW BUG

It was a barebones day for the social feintfacade; her creds were jumped so hard that her choker threw in some pure sed just to stop her pulsing out of her skin. She'd said to the local area, you know we were all made of ash, and wait to blow away in time's wind, streaked to nothing while I guess you all grow beards. As if it's anyone's time, you know?

Nah, he'd said he had to dip, ghosted her hard enough to bruise. So she'd been talking herself into more work, or trying to. Flaking to the fringe like the skin basing the nails in one of those dry chills that had been all the Frost Giants were saying then. Saying nothings against other nothings in the substrata of pooled tactica, there is nothing left of the silence she'd let simmer for so long. I can leave the Clot, go with its flow to the fringes where the Veldt bleeds through even unsmoked. He bugged on his exit. So hard she thought, frenzied by the choker, that no one had the right to just go like that, stare a burn through her like if her choker told her to take a left hand path under an Aquarian moon. Her thoughts fire in the swim, alone against the stillvoid with barest of membrane.

With those types you try hard, never win; you could be scraped like gum over the sidewalk from a mistake by the



choker, mistake by you, mistake by both of you getting here, and still the world turns beneath you. The techno-death cuts so deep into the morass that echoes of daggery notes swim beneath the surface skein, thin film as hard divide; can be broken but never breached. The skin folds but the memories beneath are not there. Even and yet for sure if you're looking hard. But there they clash like frenzied wasps from hives grafted to skin like backpacks or any other way they vizzed their games. What cuts her skin is the sieved air and her lips parting in plates like tectonic disintegration.

She remembers when her spit flowed like water, like a cool brook running through her hot words. In the Chalk you can hear strains of Andronese twine and fray apart, stranding themselves with intent, scoring the silence like serrated whiplades. She listens with a primer cocked in slant like a twitching vibe thread some glow bug would use to exhume black air. Like digging for bones in one of those home system movies where your daily routine is broken up for for some reason she is still running her tactica bifocused, and so dark paths share realtime with bright ones, even when at best she can reach an underwhelming serene neutral space but of course you break the pace up, glacial pace snoozefest, by rolling on top of whoever. So it doesn't



matter what you're watching. Could be asiatic dog collar
explo while you're so high on sidedecked holics you could
swim through the room that right now presses on you like
a velvet mattress.

This place was at the end of a rope, made me feel guided
there; drawn and led, and so now that I'm at last entombed
by ice all I can feel is the splint of my breath meeting
breath in the chasm tight tunneled through our throats.
So I'm assured there's a place for me forever. But where
will my soul fleet to unholicked, with nothing stifling the
flight of breath from my lungs through my skin and tum-
bling endless away and fading?

So out into the whiter ribbon whose traces stream through
her blood whenever she follows the right star. Whose trac-
es are enough to sketch it in vagueness in her mind. As if
the way blood courses the veins, runs the rawfilm of spi-
dered lines (like dogs) sifting through the bones and blush
spreads, not thrilling just because it's life, it's living. She
has a shadow of it. The white ribbon and what is beyond
the pale. Fine gossamer ribbons and strands of the true
spirit in blue rivers of light.

The strands of blue light run as if in parallax with the
strains of Andronese that couple and part in the harmon-



ic that slips through and past and over the stillvoid and burns silver into the haptic swim. Until word is just an echo passing over and past which is really the only way to keep it from the Veldt. That stuff makes up the milk of the Chalk that splashes pale bright colour to the flume else swallowed by darkness.

To hear more of it a primer kept sweeping the soundscape which is noise scattered over a fog pall that has smeared all but the most tactica affect noters with the discolour of NMP. Like when you're so sick of what you're reading that you reach for the ink vial, don't wait, just gloop it all now and in the stunned moment after salvage sheer joy from how life's gifts, so paltry, hopeless charity spun wayward by Frost Giants who exist just to enchamber you in the facets of their eyes where they may see you from all angles, stay in sight ambered like something you'd keep forever.

She is reaching the threshold of where you go once you're crushed out so hard the numbness is more season spice than it is salve against the pain. Like needles poking and prodding and pushing away blood but cloying along nerve running it like dogs run, paws beating the dead trail a tag she'd seen:

BUT I FELT THERE WAS NO SPOT LIKE THEE IN THE



WORLD

NO HOME TOWARDS WHICH MEMORY SO FONDLY WOULD TURN

NO THOUGHT THAT WITHIN ME MADLY WOULD BURN

so at least some others had survived the cold, mostly hackers so deep wired into their stims they would look up to talk to you but when they saw you you would not be there for them.

No, for them you are always and all the time like another piece they're pushing or placing and then of course they overflow, the dep hits and for the first time in a while they look at you like you're a glazed soju tart. Well, they credjumped you for the priv. But isn't that another mask, like they don't care until they care, but of course some void in them has tumoured out to abscess their heart while they weren't looking.

"Am I like that to you too, a rushing breath frantic because she thinks an Andro is stalking her, moving silent, near floating with the millipede ellipses of her tendrils shifting, fusing, splitting for purchase over the fabcrete of the Chalk. Frantic whispered out as breath forced from lungs to nothing. With her scanners she's getting pings



steady cadenced like the pattern of rainfall and the way even in deflect it trips the scrapers, getting quick in enough to carve a runway groove.

Doesn't know why anyone would be so brave, runningersatz stupid all over her trails, because the bloom pulsing through her spools, through some grip on strength like marrow, is the way she has come and the way a miscellany of tactics, and Veldt knows whatever the Recyclers have, have ordered all these waypoints. One zero is present, past; that is how to read the stream, and so all strands are one in the end, a comfort for the theocrypha of their morassed apocheirs.

The Andro stalking her, all for not being a Recycler, is a blemish on her tactica, the way sometimes, the Recyclers are known to boast, 'cycling like smoothing out creases in skin, working out the wrinkles and folds.

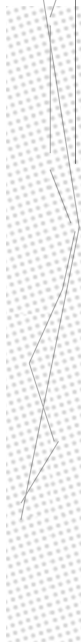
In the math, one had tagged as a revenance of the memetic that took flight like an apocheir discard, that for them swapping you out didn't just feel right to them, but felt good. Like it feels good to set her up like this and she's turning over her social strats. Turn around to at least deny them the vampiric EXP boost. The one that gets them all nowhere, filters the good stuff from the well. From the



blue rivers that lace the Chalk because to see and feel is to hone a tactica like you hone a beast by starving it. She'd once thought tactica was like that, that the more you waited around the stronger it got.

Sometimes good karma, though, is bad karma left on the scaleplate, is by offering itself negating itself for any future use. Really that's how she sees the press of ice smothering her, spreading her, smearing her. Until she is dust, she is ash and from her ash blooms the flowers, petals skimming the blood like lilypads.

Nerve cells pressed to atoms and scattered like dead leaves leavened by frost into crisp crunch underfoot by the time winter is here and spring, you could chase spring, chase it forever through time and now you will never find it.





BLACK VEIN

She tells the stranger he or she'd better have good reason for creeping so close to her aura. Thinks to say it and when she tags him giving permish just for this to happen, where the other route is now he could just leave. Soft spirals twisting in milk fluff through the slits in veil, to sliver through like butterfly pins like soft kisses teeth the flesh and leave it pockmarked, blistered like the black rock of sept mountain. Where life is a shell and we are only fading from it, sinking further and further, twisting into the framings of our own false synapses. She says she's gonna split his chassis if he thinks it works any other way. Be cool and float on.

He says, "reason here be that you're on death drive, like you've just realized your apocheir is totally sealed over. You think they just let you go around, space casing out? Disaster/peace." Words slip like ghosts through the tactica to conjoin it on the periph verves where all meanings suffer like smoke the drifts, the ebbs of the stillvoid, and the Veldt which is only above and cannot be below.

"So tell me where you see this going," he says.

She'd let herself be known, put her real name in with



a bunch of autogens. Truth is no name is real to her, is still left in her tactica; it slipped away in some dreaming, some Cradle fritz. That was so long ago it gnaws at the inside of her chassis with the ugly flavoured pain of rancid mem. Going sour and bitter to taste of the rustflecked steel which itself gnashes against the body with the burn of blood. Gnashes against viz that way, fault lines in the whole tactica and from there bleeding it to bleach death. The pale shine of absent space is the milk in the white and without it there is just glass.

There is the mirror and there is the water, the sight and its reflection. So Gemini. So twin pangs of hunger and thirst and laughing at the pain holics, when grace in motion maxed out at a writhing limb dance that made everyone think you had serious ultraphasia. Out on some black vein stretch down the carpet dust of the nukeworld frontiers.

"Thought I could grab a cloaker," she says, after he gives on that prong, "and just slip away." Can't be that easy. Can't fill out some cosmic form with 'been down for a brief chronal, but the universe isn't supplying me with my corrosive cancergen.' Fast pass to a vacant shell. Threading into the ether to find a home behind a weary headplate.

Pluming words, inktrail jets eking their grip and dismayed



by the silence to diffuse into charged air. Scatter cloudlike in the visualis. In tufts and slivers of black fluff, lacing meanings with their own discordant counters. She can see it all and when he shrugs she's not surprised. "Entropy/atrophy has staying power for the hunted."

"Who are you," she says, "that it's your viz that counts?" And what it is, and not, to you or anyone if I'm marked for 'cycling, because my morass, the amnionesis, must be asking questions now, through the apocheir seal in flame that sparks haptic in our still, heavy space. Our haunted space. Which would upset any algo still struggling out there, the shock gleam of the bone through skin, of hard-edged truth deep seated as shared dream, behind the milk and the quicks of the blue light rivers. Server magnetic through the checkpoints themselves set up as channel nodes just to help the ghosts out. So much charity casing for the afteraltered, she thinks, and for the still living too.

"I'm a Prescribe," he says, "I tally Recycler names from the Veldt and I tally their IDs when they come out to play. When an Andro debloods them." He is all in black with cold green eyes gleaming from where the milk glass fuses with socket in crystalline cluster. Words through her tactica tracing ellipse paths through the shrinings and



crossings of the real brightened and etched out in fade.

All by type, by standard, what is missing, what is sought for, and what is too close or far away to be worth the fret.

So a chiascuro of meaning and then the architectura pale like snow in the Chalk, grounding it, keeping all she says tethered to the strata of her passage, from larval cube to simmied and symmetred plateflesh.

"You work for the Patrons," she says. "So what, if it wasn't you it would be someone else."

That was such a glaring cold chill into the harmonic scene that it's clear all she wants is to make him pay, not for what he's doing but the creep in his step getting here.

"Cloaker in it for you," he says, "you kill the one they call St. Anuvai."

And before she knows it, filaments all over her, mainlin-ing her the tally, the waypoint. They'd snaked out from his spoolings beneath the chassis, hardwired as chasers, like primers with teeth.

Gone with a whisper, cold breeze plaiting the dampness of her fibres, where they strand beneath her plateflesh, running her chassis and her limbs. Starpoint cuts let the





rush through, the cold sliver of absence.



EWICIGIZI
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2AM
WAECEM02
NINENBV
COMMOD0
BIZ02
EBV01D0
NGLVICE2
22E
202LEWDI
IB20W
0012
WGI00V
W0E0V
D0G0VE
E1
T0V0VE
W1 01
IWCIDID0
LEW0V
EIN2W0D
2ED D0
WE EGI1'
VDIBIZCI
INB
COM2ECIE
WWE1'
211
D0G0V
IB20W
T0VEW





THE WHALE

I kiss the glass and pull away and then it's like we never met before or something. She's standing outside Grand-mère's CCC, she'd dragged herself there but it hadn't been dragging herself away. Sight of gross hypo'd flesh through the tank, the vatbroth a battlechurn between blue cleansant and green rance. And chambered they were arranged row by row, stack stack stack, the way it looks from outside, just a grey box slabbed in with other boxes, other complii. In this zone fetid with some sterile smell like candlewax.

She's not thinking about her grand-mère because pre-holic choker she chose what to think about. Nights before the choker were webways to the black forest which sept from the shadows high on enough sleep and food dep.

When they first fit the choker she screamed, tore at it with her hands, because it had been tuned and calibered by some intern too busy joyreading the latest issue of Cramp to send even one hyperthrust of focus out into the waiting world.

Before that she wasn't thinking about her. She was thinking of some dude, all the same, all the same in pushing her toward the black forest. Now outside the CCC it calls





stronger than ever. Voiceless it can still tell her.

On nutri-bars paying her own slack focus to eating enough to live. If I became what Grand-mère is I could never leave the C and in a C the only sane way to be is to want to leave.

Here moonlight is splitting the night like a spear and hitting the paced grooves and finer disintegration lines and spilling through them where she can't see.

Voiceless the black forest can tell her again, again, as mulch to the earth she would not be missed but for once worth it.

First trophied than hypertrophied to press staunch against the vatglass which churns with the froth and the hypos glint beneath the foam. Obscured by tufts, like spores, like cotton clouds. To make the shape shapeless yet behind the veil of froth gloop, beating against the slabbed pane of the C, still semblance. As if shadow once it has eaten all light.

So it's fast forward 'cause the whole thing is an echo loop. Here sometimes always getting closer at the same rate you're getting further away. Where the black forest here is strongest is the only place around with the shape of leaf and water. So she fakes like she's gonna succumb and pull back and then just fails to pull back, because you can never push yourself, only pull yourself, bleak-eyed and staring headlong somewhere you



don't wanna go. Before the choker it was like that and then when she had the choker she had the easy way through the astral trip and the trip was all there was because the black forest wasn't there and never would be again.

Spacing out, she's missing time, faster and faster. The lush is the shape of leaf and water, leaf tumbling in bright foils and water brooking green grass. Sunbeam splitting the night, moonlight in trail behind her. In those days light followed. Light was always with you as you approached the black forest. Then you'd know, soon enough, that the light was in you and you were nothing else.

As the light chases her she makes her way into the preserve now forking into bramble paths through a forestry overlaid by the black. Like the sleep she lost was her heart still beating through it and that catches up with her as now it steals away and with it goes time awake, tethered by focus of any kind to present action. So now being here is the ghost of being there.

The shadows as if taped over the foil and foliage, as if the darkness could never steal away itself but would have to be torn. As if you could breathe time and have that breath taken from you. Time kept condensed in breath. When you are missing breath where does it go? What would be left in the lungs but its shadow in black, and that would linger until the next





inward flume of the slow death (the rebirth, her choker will tell her when she wakes up and can't move.)

When she was strapped to the gurney with gossamer light-lines fleeting EVs slipping the surface of her skin. You are leaving. A voice enmeshed in static and tones bloodless even if you could pick them out clear from the haze. You are leaving. Where are you going? Don't leave, don't go. The wheels if she could see them working grooves of dust over lacquered porcelain. The ceiling flecked with dry, dark dots, etched over with runed memoriams. Prayers for all ghosts who chose the here and now to slip away:

They expect you to ride the lines soon enough, the lines you can't see, and the ones that surf the tiled ceilingboard past you too fast to read.

The hallway blurs into white shrieks of light streaking and the runic psalms are like moss over the ceilingboard with the gauze a full splint press for a shattered body. Pushing up against it, is she pushing? No effect. The lightline EV drip and the first awkward noosefit of the holic choker.

In white porcelain halls the astral trip chaser blooms like the song of crickets rising from the fields, as darkness falls, as the thrushes sleep.



VORPAL BLUES

She drifts then with her morass stolen by the wavedance of the cool blue river, though she follows it to where the light pacing scores the ID tag, beating through the pooled tactica, skimming like cream the surface of the Chalk. Pacing in nervous blink like a midnight star. In what is lain over the dead screensky that carpets the stillvoid of LAYSE-CHI. Chambered by symmetric halls. That is all void, upwards clinging to the Veldt.

She thinks pulse will soon ossify to solid shape and the deathmask of the Recycler will resolve, within them the eyes of glitchburn aug'd by the technodeath that will theme them in. The Prescribe had tallied this one as 'St. Anuvai,' the name routing quick through the tactica now building in shell and design fortress paths of faith, blessed in safety, cutting through the strobing guilt of all other patchwork routines.

When he mainlined her was she 'graded with fresh morass 'ware? For past that was the barrage of light, missed ops flaring sunburst in the haptic smokechurn though she'd been doing all she could.

Still it's like trying to chart the movements of gods when





they're up there in the Veldt, the Patrons' endless rave fuelled by the Recyclers keeping Andro framecounts stable. You could have slipped me a ghost, she thinks. Thinks about that.

Shining teeth are the lines lancing through the stillvoid chambered in the shaped halls of drawn light and the fog of unknowing is black static in clustered clouds breaking, blotting and smearing the spacetime 'sects that prove the way her morassed apocheir maps the Chalk's tableau. Thinking, we have looked long and hard to learn what has been sealed from us.

By now the crook of her neck aches the way it's planted into her headboard. She wonders if the holic choker is telling her she needs to leave.

She plants a foot on cold porcelain. Her skin tinged faint hue of rose from the EV's and her gown rustles' cross her ankles. Ghost of herself shimmers and stabs from the waxen pale floor.

Beds in the room she's in are vacant, most of them, sparsed a few sleepers strewn and bundled. She was the first to slip from her cot. As she touches down the cold spikes her sole and lances up, arching with bone and nerve. Her tongue presses



probing loops into her teeth.

It's the holic choker at work; with the tampers on joy from warmth and pain from chill both. So either it knew what she would do or wanted her to do it. As she presses through the door she hears a sharp gasp, a murmur, the rustle of a body turning over.

She steals into the hall. Nurses study her with EM goggles and teeth bared from lips pulled back by age. None stop her. Gathered in circles of chatter, here and there, or on their way through the hall. The porcelain glitters like ice but any memoriam is swallowed by what her choker does to their runic signs.

They no longer strive as epitaph but reverse themselves, the holics pointing bright signs, bright stars from the glyphs. Constellating them into networks searing scars into her astral self. Here now they speak to her of fates, of ego paths to come; she will know them when she is living them. When she disintegrates she will know that they were all that matters.

She sees that, and so can translate to her present self, all that matters now.

What matters now is fixing in on the gridpoint pulsing,





the mark like a star cloven, the slash in and out like a promise. The way this will go foretold. But she doesn't think the Prescribe would soft serve her.

St. Anuvai is veiled by a cloak, tatters curling tendrils and scraping in tufts over the white pixelfire of the Chalk. Here the stricken architectura tells her she is far from home and alone. Home where the latticed slabs were charcoal grey, and to get there she'd left her Cradle, as if LAYSE-CHI beyond couldn't be denied. St. Anuvai in their tatterfold has this nano driven a vorpal blade deep through an Andro, even as the pooled time stasis reserve kicks off, even as all Andros in the area have space to decide if they want to trigger cloaklers. The Andro is slumped to knees, quivers of tendrils running limp with dead slack. Their eyes of glassmilk faded out and with it any chance to scan them, find them later in their refuge from the endless burn.

If you were a friend, if you had them scanned, you could find them later. But all Andros know the pain of vacancy, even if they'd never felt it. Even if they loop and of course some never do but drown in the stillvoid's rippling shadow, drowning pool of the tactica absolve, the dataspace the loops take up, that which is shucked by the morassed am-nionesis of the frames. Shucked and offered up to brace



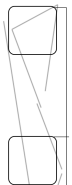
the Veldt.

So you exist because we let you, and we exist because you let us. But which Andro can ever know the bracing, the aurora glimmer breaking in the slants of the Veldt, when you see it just in the tactica, knifing through in concrete stab, where unveiled by pattern it is just a shadow. A ripple in the ocean. In the stillvoid without the tactica you'd see dead air. The haptic swim and the sea of ghosts, though, couple to make a space for the Veldt to cling to.

When St. Anuvai looks up her eyes are shredded. Phosphor-spored, tufts of cloudlight, the glitchburn's final form.

Lesia remembers the clear burn of the Silent Clot, the film of colourless light. Neutral and serene like the skin of wax. The clear burn and how it tempered and set off at once the blue light within.

She thinks that's how clear it is, the need that ekes from Andros and even from Recyclers, so much fear in this glitchburn that her upped amnionesis scans and translates it straight to her lexics. The fear and then when they 'cycle an Andro they get a break. Thinks it's that clear and then the water murks, silts up, and she sees it's all hatred.





Murked over as if seabed pearl swept by sands but now
bared and gleaming.

By now, too late she's slipped into her run and has set
off twin smokers at strafing trails to St, Anuvai's sides, and
she thought that would at least get her closer, under veil
of serene tactica, but it sours. The technodeath is peaking,
riffs sledging into each other, stabs in constant rise, the
blastbeat thudding.

St. Anuvai slices some field through the smokers with her
vorpai, moving in, coming in low. Lesia is twisting, her
body in crescent spinning over to avoid a certain death
slash. Touching down trying to keep track of smokers.
When she's out the tactica will bleed down, dry to dull-
ness, like creased wax paper, worn out and obtuse.

But she's readied a third smoker. Comes up with it after
a roll, her last chance to see and salve, massage it back it
into a steady state. Whips it sidearm with a curve, so it fol-
lows St. Anuvai even as she ducks away with it.

So Lesia sets and moves. The stillvoid is stranger than
it's ever been to her, shifting and swirling and St. Anuvai
dancing through it in silhouette. She can see her curve has
gouged a crater in the Recycler's shoulder. Stained in pale



crimson, ebbing, thin gossamer strands of blood. All other Andros have ghosted the scene but she feels scanners on her still, waiting for them to go away, thinking, only a matter of time.

There is timeless now against the glow, true aurora that burns pale emerald through the veins of the Frost Giants, eking out channels that crook and split like rivers do. Because they pressed on her all of them and she shrank beneath it until she was nothing. Like the black forest sank you to nothing and now these two points connect. Point by point as if a dream could be shared like a network. As the needle slips the thread through.

As embossed scant and paltry she is spread beneath the surface seams of the paper.

She's found the wound, sees it full and open, the white moon pluming across velvet sky. The cut where the tactica bleeds crimson light. Where I am bleeding in the black light beneath the surface of the paper. That strains against the seams and leaves a dew of shimmering glitch across the real, that you can see, unchoked like the forest she'd tried that life to join. I just had love in my mind, squeezed through the heat tips of the choker, embossed into being.





What I am a loop broken; my loomed lines cut but now
there is no neck to choke breaking her chest against
the blade in a context the tactica lost. She thinks she got
globbed a bug in the mainline, the 'ware too good a thing.
The tactica's best promise to her heated holics infused
into her blood through the tips; in my pale reflection
swimming beneath the surface to keep her safe in the
fog of unknowing, that in sudden terminal plume swarms
her visualis.

How am I else? Same time I am stars breaking, splitting
apart, and shooting jagged slabs of light into the void.





TRIBUTARY

When that vorpall had come in splitting her chassis the overdub had crackled spitfire and smoked the way clear out the crook of her backplate. The way clear out through the amber dawn. If such a light could break here. She'd felt it leave the spinal amnion line and felt the insides soak, too much at once. Nanomating in overflow or the stillvoid itself bent in the foam somewhere beneath the bubbles clustered in film like spit. She bends, folds, spilling across the chrome steel, bleaching it in white scars, trails of amnion searing where they gush forth.

When she gets there will the river still be braided, twines of light finding each other in spiralling strands? To be swallowed as I am swallowed outward, you get paranoid trawling the surface from downfilm like a clinger, a biter. So she's drowning in some corrosion, beset and drenched in it and she could breach the surface in murk spray like a fetid swamp thing. "Here I am world, the grossest you've ever seen. Because I have no body because it disintegrated as I followed the seams of my path.

She thinks of how when she went there first she was alone. But now some part of her morassed apocheir knows she was sent to be hewn and parted. The clotwork still swims



bright blue and the milk light within courses its trails to far off reaches of the Hub. Where the architectura rises and falls in bleach like teeth in the Chalk. Vapetrails all you can see of the Recyclers, pluming from a wolven sneer and St. Anuvai's glimmer lips have parted to reveal the mist curling out as if grasping from darkness.

She is saying to leave. You should be leaving.

No, she struggles, trying to find the bleed, the amnioneses breaking the apocheir seal, warping her visualis. Too much now and she wants to seal it off. She's saying to stay put. Stay put so I can 'cycle you. You're in the right space and time for that function.

How can you not hear what echoes unsaid, echoes through no speech, no burn on the viz, yes, and more like harmony than noise because no one conveys what you should really do. They convey what you should do for them but the Cosmere is served mere and more by the struggle against.

When I untether myself, she thinks, when I slip away. You'd better be near the Clot for that. Lost so much amnion. I don't know how. I'm bleeding out. I can't move. St. Anuvai's face glares with the gleam of her teeth flaring out the contours of her skull like black rainbows. Then



she feels her tendrils gather, hears them beading over the plaited chrome steel with a sound like worms mushing together in the dark places. An abyss of worms that hidden from sight clots together in squirming mass.

Obscured from sight. Her tendrils twine and gather as if rooting her not to stillness but movement. As if her roots can take her away while her drive, her visualis is elsewhere. Chambered as if in some crater beneath her chassis.

My name is Chere. Your name is Lesia.

My ghost name, she thinks. Because there's no journey waiting for me to find. I'm opened up here in the white Chalk dead some paced chronals from the Clot.

Because St. Anuvai would not allow it. St. Anuvai has other problems. She sees this with a look not thrown back as snapped, tossed, near forgotten. Because every Andro she'd seen at first and more besides are decloaking, unfurling themselves with bodies lithe and lustrous from the dark corners of the architectura. Spaced out, checked out, if it's going wrong find that better tomorrow. Luxed out on their mindscapes and dream moves they needed me like you need a flower in the corner of a room.





When she'd first seen the black forest it had burst in shadow petals and plumes but the last time she saw it was streaked with silver, the silver aflame and stranding pearls like blood droplets across the shadow.

The architectura is creeping by, as the walls of the Chalk keep her twisting and turning. Her body is, her body will be. As if she was ghosted, long ago, and didn't know it, because the ghost didn't make itself at home, but hid itself away, in a corner of her massed apocheir somewhere. Most ghosts never shut up, but if you could keep yourself silent so that I stole out just in dreams, just to hold hands, have my hand held through it then no one would complain. You could be there forever that way.

When she'd first seen hands, pale pink strobed with translucence, and known she was more than a body, but she'd forgotten.

In that moment Lesia had been so sure she'd remember.

The Silent Clot where the milk rivers of blue light find themselves battered, broken, shine through the carapaceal like seeing the light beneath bone dashed against the slab-spire that the Libra have forged out of black chrome steel. The light diffuses into it and ekes its way to the other



side in spiderweb strands. The way out is to tether yourself through and remember you will feel the pain or joy of every choice, and still life what is being unphaseable, kept for a freeze of time in chambered chassis has been mind-fit to mindfit, moment to moment, as the choker warped me through the astral trip.

What is in her to look also listens. Listens for anyone's haptics. Gazes at the spiderweb of light woven across the slab, thinking, to be a mote of light coursing my way through my strand. Eking my way for firmer passage against the black which would be all diode, guile signals from chips and casing beneath the chrome steel, threading the motes along their way. Guile signals meeting the innocence of motes.

Anyone's haptics. Even with her chassis opened up she waits for them. Any Andro at all. Never thought my flame would drift out alone, always thought there would be someone around, like there's always someone around. Always a face of enmeshed beads and eyes of milk glass. In the visualis with the shared haptic dream.

Waits even for the phaseflicker, because they'd come in like fireflies, blinking in. To release her from it. The banks are still, straight slabs of black marble through the light,





barren of any port. A tag splashed in neon green flickers in beading light across the black. How penumbraic, she thinks, her rolled eyes even back so she can't see her own amnionese. You'll say, it was good to be a frame to any watchers. Then bloom like algae in the swim. The ocean beyond the gate of the Clot.

I'll be waiting for you there.

Across the chasm of herself, on the other side where the real is supposed to be happening, there is a flicker, there are some flickers but she's lost them. Taking steady shape as obelisks or diamonds. Past the clotwork she'll find what she wants. Opened up to the void, the amnionese seeking in bursting streak the diodes flush full beneath the marble. Opened up to the swim breaking in its stranded lines open themselves, with the threads in flash severance cascading blossoming platelets of light to meet her.

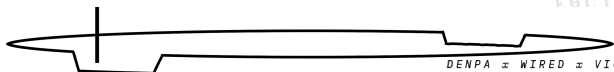
Where the Libra flicker in the sky carpets itself in signs, and on the other side is the black forest, and you can still reach it, if you want, you can be pure again. Still now it is labyrinthed from you their phase-Cradles warp through one by one. Far away, past the tether severed. The Cradles burn like molten cores.



2
LVCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECEN02
010EVB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EVB0100
011BICE2
23E
2026END1
1B20W
0012
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M101
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E102W0D
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WE E11
0D1B12C1
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Like the sky itself carpeted. But the sky is a maze your soul travels when you see it. The black forest waits still on the other side. Its leaves frisson into the air a cool hunger. A cool drawing of the darkness still, when you've gone beyond the light.





DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psychoGRAMMA

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

by: caraparcél

PSYCHOGRAMMA

Name: Dacia

Sex: female

Occupation: 3D modeler, psychosphere reader, part-time Vanguard moderator

Blood type: A

Likes: boolean surfaces, alignments, descriptions of a person's habits

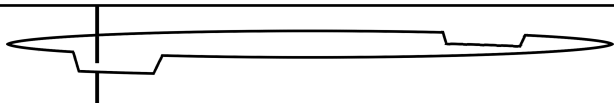
Dislikes: spider's concealed gregarity when used to check out users, health organization missionaries, people who think life is a movie, snobbery

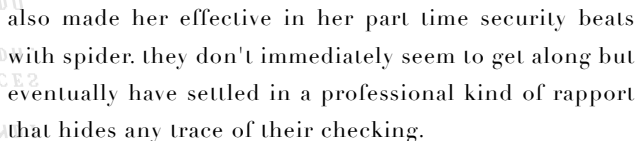
Seen with: aleppo, spider, saturna, kunakida



character profile

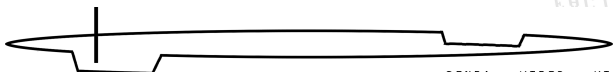
despite the wired's physical transition, the flaneur and browser remains. dacia is one such person. she keeps a measured distance despite her familiarity with psychospheres and their compatability with the user's avatars. she's not as willing to jump into reading that data. some call it repulsion, others call it a spot where she watches from and still has an accurate read on users. this





also made her effective in her part time security beats with spider. they don't immediately seem to get along but eventually have settled in a professional kind of rapport that hides any trace of their checking.

while not the most social, she only speaks to those she deems it necessary to speak to. something that flattered kunakida when they started speaking to be thought of as important to someone. has several installations in the east continent. likes stories about temporal displacement.



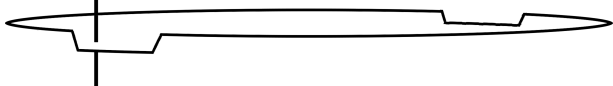
DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psYCHogramm

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

Synopsis

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.



Last Time

producer creates a task force to apprehend all members of the secret society platinum torus helio, and returning to the wired with a new technique known as step-transfer from samhain, foxtel approaches their heavily guarded high rises and manors. may the spectacle ensue amidst the exchanges.



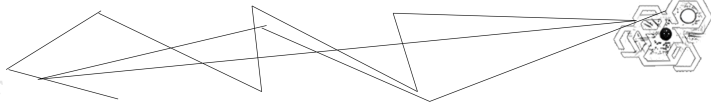
cw: american balkanization, guns, open carry, racialized paranoia, armed intimidation, combat, mind-body separation, sex trafficking, coerced sex work, deepfake porn, dehumanization, animal masks, organ trafficking, doppelgänger

floes of the wired sweep activity across the globe into delocalized coordinates, continents sunk under the flickers of data until their jagged shores recede like frost on a window, shores melt into the warmth of unseen summers until even the land became these small instances that flashed between the transfer of electric signals such as the ones that sent us to the american frontier whose states formed server spaces out of their bandwidth similar to local bbs systems with their own user types and inhabitants based on sects of christianity or ideas of american identity from wild west saloons to mortared inner cities. others made their way to that continent to form small communes in the middle plains replicating that american dream of

PROTOCOL 03.1: SECOND FACE I

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DENPA * WIRED * VIOLENCE
PSYCHOGRAPHY
ELECTRICAL SIGNALS CONSUMMATION

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AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
01NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
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E102WOB
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1B2NW
ROBEN



the first discovery of shores and green fields torn out of the turbulent static whose images swayed until they arrived, emerging from the radiant darkness within virtual space as they set up mobile residence cubicles with 9g modems whose antennas spanned out in crosses like hands open towards the signals that crumbled the pieces of the sky until they consumed the vision within internal operating systems, hearing the faint melodies of old songs somewhere out there in the receding glow. there was no longer any past of decorated podiums and marble pantheons as many became the serfs and nomads once regarded with indulgence and longing in this return of the so-called old world unlike the cities within the continent whose streets hardly saw anybody wander them as their emptiness stared at anyone who trespassed it, their reflections warped across the smooth faced buildings as it could soon stain a distant part of another's world that we can't access past the surface.

a consultation job for a development of an artificial landmass that carved into grottos underwater rooms whose doorways poured down balcony decks that swirled around the underground complex, the feel of being underwater replicating the sensation of the wired, floating within this blue that stored up all the dreams so far away



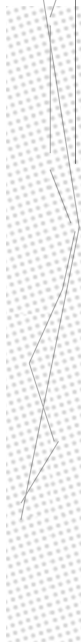


from us until we only saw ourselves crumple in its oceans or disappear entirely in the sky whose nights serrated off the streets in one of the glamorous cities once known as atlanta. apartments fashioned in grey blocks with cornices, entryways, arches and emblems embossed on them, sometimes catching the sunlight or the flicker of signals around us bathing the streets within the clouds spun from the tires of a sports car, its flat hood undulated to the roof that spread out around the rear engine bay, circular tail-lights blushing across the air as if even the moon in this night could still unveil colours with its rays shot until even the buildings around us glowed slightly from it. people around us parked at the sides of the street in a variety of sports cars and luxury sedans, some lining up to the intersection to pay tribute as its own sign of the cross within its own motorized rhapsody. even those on foot found each other within the smoke that unfurled into their encounters bursting with chance meetings that bathed the commotion of users and inhabitants on the steps or near cars, others making small circles to drink or eat at the curb or on the beach chairs and tables brought outside. in this kaleidoscope of life and intersections between these passersby, did it seem like the beginnings of the wired started here with individuals as a single node whose rays then crossed another and as they gathered in this communion,



assured that no matter how far they were, they were always connected and that in the lakes of motion and signals, we appeared somewhere within it for an instant, even as one catches up to a group who slows down and nods to them in approval, another ripple within the weaves of encounter..

i sit on the steps of one of the buildings to watch the festivities, nodding my head to passersby, some raise their bottles or shout towards us and i maintain a soft smile, and i enjoy this momentary appearance in their lives thinking this the kind of formal informality would be nice to inhabit once in a while. viper keeps a constant distance, appalled by the loud displays around him, and despite the insistence from tai shu that it wasn't high risk, still took to heightened security measures with a concealed alka mod 93 sub-machine gun to which some people around us must have detected, turning towards us while others swung their hand to their sides before i take viper and walk off, only waving towards them. even sitting down, he still got looks from people and as he stared back, they must have appeared momentarily as walking silhouettes that would turn suddenly, snapping his palm into the curve of the grip, as his fingers would find themselves pulling the sub-machine





gun's slab like frame upward until the short barrel faced the target, the muzzle flashing from 120 rounds a minute illuminating its pincer-like iron sights but he only opened and closed his hand, coiled up in silence as the backfires from the lines of cars and whoops from the crowd would close in and he'd spring into this encounter that he'd view as an inevitability like a clock's rotation that would soon reach the second, exactly like a wind-up toy.

'hey, can you come here please?' i sigh to him.

'i'm only taking security measures.'

'man, you already had the clients at the underwater district on edge a little.'

'i read this place has got open carriers everywhere and there's things they aren't telling. you can't be sure.'

'ayo, these guys are just chillin' man. it's nice that they celebrate'

'have they never considered it being a bother, all this gasoline and noise? none of this would pass where we're from. they'd have to stay in the wired.'

'yet people still come here sometimes.'



‘no offense but you’re just a consultant. this is the real world and you have to be on guard at all times. besides, you, like too many, stay in their rooms and go out via the wired anyway.’

‘yeah, what else you wanna extol on me?’

‘i’m just saying, to be careful of any and all threats’

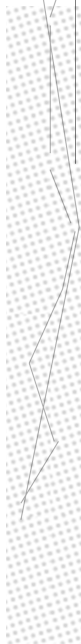
‘whatever you say spook cowboy,’

viper returned to his guarded pose that clutched at him, keeping him at bay with a distance that he could pretend formality, especially optimal for a spray of the sub-machine gun to clear a combat situation that never happened. especially as a few people join us at the steps. one of them approaches with a wool vest with leather sleeves, a satchel bag strapped at his chest.

‘hey dior-man let me talk to you real quick.’

‘by all means’ i invite him to take a seat as he slides next to me, his friends also sit around me, those at the periphery take glances at viper while i send him messages from our line to hold back.

‘i’ve been seeing y’all around the vicinity on non-client





status.'

in this state, visitors originating from the wired were on client status which only allowed them to interact with the areas within their internal os' but full transfers for consultants needed their own screening process and recommendations from residents. being under tai shu and with saturna's own projects done here, they were quick to get us access.

'you can tell? that's quite impressive'

'it's a feeling, you don't give off the feeling of being wired bound. you here right now, same with the snowman back there.'

'i apologize on his behalf, snowmen get really funny around uh, non-standard climates'

'non-standard huh? the arctic's gone years ago, man's dreaming of a foregone world huh?'

'don't let him hear that'

'i can hear you, you know!' viper shouts and the group around me parts as i slap my hand his direction.



‘hey man, don’t you know about client confidentiality?’

‘our business is confidential, we don’t have time to be fraternizing’

a girl with curled hair and a blouse with an overcoat pulled down her shoulders rolled her eyes with the shaken heads and sighs of her friends before turning to the one with the satchel.

‘spider, these people got no sense sometimes, we got enough going on with all these client servers and all’

‘yeah man, we just brothers and sisters out here’

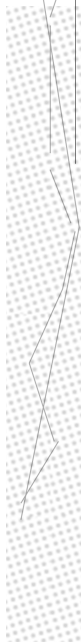
‘right...’ he narrowed his eyes.

‘it’s too damn nice of a day you know’ spider said.

‘in any case, you got a lotta visitors out tonight?’ i ask.

‘yeah, well, not full transfers but things still need a handle on as all. lotsa people wanna experience the real and suddenly it’s like it’s on us. there’s a lotta people trying to move here too.’

‘yeah, it’s a complex process i heard’





‘too much, too much’

‘hey’ the girl said. ‘you’re from the consulting group. outta tai’s?’

‘yeah?’

‘i know you. saturna talks about you a bit’

‘oh, you know saturna huh? yeah, she mentioned someone who spooled up like a cassette player, turning out gears.’

‘damn, you talk like that and you might as well put me in a museum’

‘hey!’ viper calls. ‘so explain something to me...why do all this here. aren’t there injury risks out in the real world?’

spider looked to his group before chuckling, the girl pulls her neck to the side and stretches it to both sides.

‘is there enough bandwidth?’

‘sure, it’s looking good’ spider glanced around as the cars blushed through the smoke, some had geometric line decals shot across their doors, others sparkle paint, the signals turning each flake into stars, skies that turned out



sports cars, their large rear fenders fell like waves but at a raise of the girl's fingers, the stairs underneath us glowed until their light carried away all the commotion until the pavement remained in a square as she walked up, wavelengths emit from her palm as the signals dancing of my arm dull slightly as a second version of her appeared, this time with curled hair and grey jacket with stripes but this version of her arrested the signals across her skin as if the various colours flickering eased to their brown hue surfaced out of the blurred spheres of my vision blanched in the concrete melted into the space like fluorescence.

'this avatar'

'yeah, this is something that's been here for a long time. avatars on the wired that felt like actual people. things like weight, height, dimensions can be replicated but the real needs a lot of signal strength, hence why your vision might be blurry. vr had something similar where everything within your peripheral vision isn't rendered unless you're looking at it.'

'i think saturna knew something about this, she had the ability to change bodies on the wired, i saw her do it from the footage of the castle forest raid'





‘you saw that huh? yeah, she did it through disassociating herself, in the feeling, spawning the second body. there’s a calibration process within one’s avatar so having multiple versions to sync up to in an emergency is possible’

‘but this must be difficult to maintain isn’t it?’

‘well, to make these avatars, it takes a lot of concentration to map the different calibrations’

she sat in the middle of the square and even in the wired, her movements while languid did not diminish her presence that stretched beyond into the closed space, unlike the kinds that rendered 2 dimensional schematics that wrapped around my contours. i was in her world beyond just the boundaries where the soft pink ether enveloped us as her eyes saw everything from the faintest ripple in my psycho-sphere as her own could grasp each nerve or flashes of touch within unseen fingers to arrange them into the structures within the avatars as did the light shone across her knuckle imagining the bone or perhaps inhabiting one’s own body but once i blink, chatter flushed around me, a bosozoku ambassador sedan with a rear spoiler like a popped collar drummed its exhaust notes with backfires and i heard spider talking to viper.



‘so because of the stratification of reality, we figured we could take on this last bit of the earth. it had been a long time since then, you know, seeing things like it’s out of a cartoon.’

‘the real world has limits. this is just a zero sum game’ viper countered.

‘zero sum, yeah there’s some zeros alright amidst the tons of em in the sum of how many people still show up here.’

‘hmpf, that’s not indicative of anything. people just flock to whatever new thing there is.’

‘well more importantly, thanks to the wired and reality going their separate ways...it’s like we finally got an exit.’

‘exit? hmpf’ viper scoffed but viper shrugged, slapping his hand on his knee before turning to us.

‘aight dacia, i’m done doing educational duty. you done here?’

‘yeah,’ she said before nodding to me. ‘tell saturna we said hello.’

‘sure thing’





‘yeah, and tell that dude’ he said pointing to viper making sure he knows he’s being referred to. ‘not to watch so many cartoons.’

viper merely struck up the middle finger to them while they laughed and i waved to them, thinking that in these exchanges, the least i could do was see them off before they entered into the clouds of signals, transferring out to different servers. it was a kind of tribute to all the users that we’ve encountered at that moment, wishing them peace on the wired.

‘these guys.’ viper shook his head. ‘are we done here?’

‘are we done here?’ i laughed. ‘i know operators say that after their ops or whatever but damn...’

‘laugh it up laugh it up.’

‘alright let’s stick around a bit longer and try to look like you enjoying yourself.’

we walk along the street, users flit through the clouds, swimming through the gasoline mirages radiating from the asphalt as if they swam off the bodies of the cars beside us, a little kei car with full moon and red trees across its



side but as i turn, a man steps out in front of me, eyes narrowed towards us, the tail-lights flashed beside him wash off his dark skin like a tide, revealing him with a maroon vest comprised of polygons connected together around his shoulders and under his arms but what strained underneath was obviously some kind of a2 class body armour.

‘you foxtel, right? detective off eastern continent?’

i look to viper for a moment who only insists i answer him as he steps back to walk to the side, only imagining where he’s gonna place himself, watching for that sudden violence that supposed haunted these streets break out that would prove his reproach.

‘speaking’

‘speaking? is this a telephone conversation?’

‘well we wouldn’t wanna be getting anything we wouldn’t said on tap’

‘what, someone following you around?’

‘call it, nature of confidentiality...’

as we spoke, viper appeared on the steps but the man be-





fore me didn't pay him any mind yet the signals around him tensed, caving slightly around viper whose hands neared his sides in a pose of non-chalance. the man's fingers curled and like dacia, the signals around me shrank slightly in the virtual space just waiting to pour around us yet the man smirked, his banded dreadlocks at the back of his bald scalp, bobbed slightly.

'heh, ain't this some timing, see i was looking for you, got something i need help with.'

'with what?' i asked before viper interjected.

'if you have a case, put it through the forum.'

the man rolled his eyes.

'damn man, haven't you heard of client privacy?'

'you gave it away, those guys back there were checking us out?'

'nah, i just figure someone interjecting just has no sense, partna'

'i ain't your partna' i suggest you walk before i make you crawl'.



‘crawl?’ sounds like you need a lesson in humility and uh...what’s it they call...mindfulness?’ he turned his head slightly toward viper yet he only kept his hands half open as if holding onto an invisible rope and viper grins. eyes piqued, i lean to viper, the raised concrete square catches me underneath as i’ve step-transferred behind him as he just grabbed the alka mod 93, yanking his hand to the side, until he toppled to his knee while i press the magazine release, throwing the magazine away before pulling the charging handle that spat the round out of the chamber,

the man slightly closer opened his hand full but in the next moment, light slunk up the steps before the he surfaced in front of viper, rolling him to the ground and i pull back, away from the man’s hook, blocking it with the back of my hand snapping to rotate it in its wing, realizing the density within that wrist, some kind of prosthetic underneath flesh and i seized each vein in my arm channeled in my breath and it gives to this movement, my arm catches his within its flight before we both pull back and i glance behind only to see a hand within the air dissolving into the crumbs of virtual ether.

‘step-transfer and a neija practioner huh? you also got a vp70 and g3ka4 carbine as well’





‘how’d you know this?’

‘this arm conducts signal information. with just a touch, i can get a read on all kinda things. i even know that guy, viper, he’s into all kinds of freaky shit.’

‘data through contact? that sounds like something that’d be a thing here’

‘trust, i got surprises for you.’

‘alright, well, i don’t mind hanging around a bit longer, although i think viper needs to be hung up. he got strung out a little’ i said looking at viper still dazed.

‘aight, maybe the roller coaster was enough for him’

‘roller coaster?’ i think you gave him a whole drama since he thought he was about to shoot somebody’ i said before i sit up viper and i ask him ‘you alright?’

he sighs and gets up, walking to take his submachine gun, feeding the discarded round into the chamber manually before putting the magazine back in, almost in a demonstration of the technique.

‘you’re lucky kunakida wasn’t here to see this’ he said be-



fore disconnecting, transferring himself back to tai shu headquarters.

‘what a guy’ the man said.

‘yeah, he likes to play soldier’

‘man, he’d fit right in in the other states. they really love his kind, you know, tragic figure in pose or whatever’

‘so what’s this case you got for me.’

‘yeah...well. you know with the wired out here, they called it the new sun because after the old climate disasters its rays spread out onto these streets with their blessing, that was the wired and everyone could appear within it for just a moment’

‘like the sky’s the last bit of earth.’

‘mhm...’ he nodded. within the clouds, manors burned in flames flashing between the headlights as a car swept past doing donuts in the intersection before veiling itself in smoke again. ‘it seemed the apocalypse finally gave us back the world in some way and we wanted to get our-





selves together but even in the wired, you notice when things are absent, not in a way that's normal but leaves things desolate.'

'a missing persons case'

'sorta but the thing is, they say they been seeing themselves before they go missing. that's the only rumour I got.' he says before he invites me to his server and we walk up the steps to the building, the door slides open and we appear within walls fuzzed with static to which at his touch he could conjure menus in front of us where he spun a matrix of his existing leads, portraits tap across the electric signals before lines connect a list server spaces, one of them floated off the side, an interior loft with an L shaped kitchen and a large common space where residents could lounge at the center to the windows blinking with signal lights.

'a real estate firm?'

'they been poaching on the empty rooms left by those missing. but something ain't right about it. they wouldn't be purposely kidnapping people to create vacancies.'

'why not?'



‘it’s too obvious, everyone notices things like this. it looks suspicious, but i don’t wanna put that as something that they’d do, as unscrupulous as it may seem.’

‘so why do you need me? am i famous or something?’

‘a little, besides, you provide some invisibility for me. your consultation and material procurement on contract role lets you slip into machinations that i can observe’

‘what like a puppet?’

‘nah, nothing like that. think of it more being like another set of eyes. you see what i can’t see, and i’ll see what you can’t.’

‘alright...’

going out into the real world, feeling out of place in it, i asked saturna once about it watching the sky that seemed so smooth even far away, the wind felt more like distortions, sunlight flitted through the clouds until the warmth receded into a chill no different than the air conditioning unit. she then turned to me, her hair swept with the wind that nearly blew her hat off but she caught it in her hand and smirking, she said.



‘no matter where you are, i’ll be here at the edge of the static’

as she looked at me, there was little verve that trembled as electric signals do on my skin but more of an ebb that allowed us both to stay here and even as we might soon leave, we knew that when we entered the world, the wired or the real, we’d catch each other somewhere out there. the man played with the lattice structure, rearranging them to find any parts that pull from the note on possible sex trafficking networks to inter-state conflict to a note asking about facial recognition patterns, leaving a droplet of fluorescence across his eyes darting between them.

‘hey man, i didn’t catch your name?’

he turned to me and raised his eyebrow.

‘i thought your internal os would be running to tell you that information’

‘i needed to go without it for a bit. over-use is affecting cognition.’

‘hm, sounds like you off balance’

‘maybe a little’



‘well, they call me alleppo’

‘alleppo huh?’

‘yeah, let’s go with that for now’

opening the os, i sift through the files, the glow off the windows casted off my eyes until the text strained inside the profile. all of them listed in the hospital.

‘their psyche’s been separated?’

‘yeah, if they gone too long, their psyche might suffer decay creep.’

‘how long we got?’

‘a week?’

‘damn’

‘let’s move out then’

‘where to?’

‘well, if they got psyches they might chase the bodies next. we’ll look into the sex trafficking part of things.’





‘what are they gonna do? with these psyches? don’t they tune the sensation based on the avatar? why even bother with other users.’

‘the psyches linger like a ghost, and it breathes in these avatars. besides, it’s something you’d think they’d have abandoned but they didn’t’

as he mentioned this, i remember during the climate crisis from years ago, there were rumours of villages so destitute that they cobbled together a 9g tower to retreat into the wired, preserving their bodies somehow but this was before the discovery of decay creep. unable to find refuge, they transferred themselves into their avatars until small pieces of themselves remained in those bodies, bodies people claimed to feel human.

‘so we gotta sift through them? that’s a wide area to cover’

‘the good thing about these is that they have meta data. matching meta data is the easiest way to find them and narrow the zones.’

‘still using the ancient databasing method?’

‘yeah, this was from the days of silk road’ he said talking of



the old days of grey html sites with photo and text attachments, their lack of adornment spoke to a kind of pragmatism, focusing on function way before it became its own aesthetic in minimal designs and sweeping banners under headers. this carried over to the old silk road businesses with tables shrouded in darkness, letting the user enter a place completely cut off from most public bandwidth circles.

alleppo loads two firearms before him, an hk45 handgun, the rugged slide seated a long slab that bulged out like a shield, the threaded barrel extended out , his fingers seated into the serrations on the grip. after holstering it, he checks a modified akms. an assault rifle with a wooden grip swung out into his hand as he pulls back the charging handle on the side, before it sprang a 7.62x39mm round into the chamber as he grabbed the lipped handguard, wood rolled around the gas tube that lowered itself like a stiletto from a black heel onto the barrel.

‘ayo, take some of these’ he said slapping the back of my shoulder that transferred a few files: a kill-switch chaff grenade, and an exfil thread.

‘i thought these places would have clearance ware.’





‘they will which is why we’ll need dacia to get concealment material. coating inventory in this stuff will alter its make-up and pass through easy.’ alleppo says setting up a connection to another server space where a scene of a forest slides over us as if in high speed until the shadows spread out to into darkness sculpted in the radiance of neon light where mannequin limbs lay on the ground.

‘yo! dacia.’ alleppo calls and one of the plastic hands on the ground shook before retracting into the wrists of a headless mannequin that walked towards us, the face sculpted itself in the darkness in a blank faced seed like the shell of an insect where the soft neck throbbed under to produce a voice uninhibited by static.

‘sorry i can’t see you two in person. i’m a little busy with something’

‘first i gotta deal with missing people, now i gotta contend with people not being here when i need to talk to em’

‘life as a detective is hard alleppo, you ought to schedule’ dacia said.

‘right, well, we need to check out some silk road areas we’ll need some conceal gel for our inventory’



2
LVCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
GILNEBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
0N12
VR10N4
WVWV
D070KE
E1
T070KE
M1 N1
IWCID1D0
LEWBOV
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D070V
1B2NW
T070W

‘help yourself, there should be some in the back’ she said. in the distance, another mannequin walks up with two vials of translucent syrup that slid down our throats that pinched at the two capsules within it. our minds cleared slightly as i could see the tube of the bulbs the neon emitted from, my inventory nearly non existent as the movement of my steps felt smoother. ‘this should not only hide your inventory for a minute but it should also help with fatigue on the wired and other things. of course, don’t stress yourself too much’

‘aight, thanks’

‘those silk road guys will have guys waiting at the wired and at your exfil so be careful’

alleppo nodded and we transfer out, looking at the metadata to transfer into a plays server which was usually something like a club with glass flower candles illuminating each table in the dark, the other sources of light radiated from the various models, men and women idled taking drinks or having conversations with each other but each would respond once the client entered their radius. this old pickup method was centuries old and this silk road server must have catered to the nostalgia of chance meetings at night where the couples would meet, drinking





and heading to either their places or a hotel. being a consultant made this scene all the more conspicuous as all of us seemed like office workers after a late night looking for some distraction that briefly took us out of the work days in the warm darkness of another, closed eyes and embraces that stained bedsheets, bruised us up in desperation not unlike the sudden jars of recoil from firing a weapon and i thought the real world similar to that kind of force that trembled across the body until it rooted itself into the ground, limbs near weightless floating within the hands that clutched the grip, the trigger the only surface that remained.

meta data scrolled through different individuals that walked in and out of the club until one of them matching the description appeared and approaching her, she smiled and turned to me.

‘hey there, i haven’t seen you around. would you like to drink with lil ol’ me?’

‘that’s why i came here tonight’ i winced a smile before taking a seat next to her.

‘that jacket of yours is interesting. are you from a mega corp?’



‘i just work for them sometimes’

‘oh! that’s just so freeing isn’t it?’

‘well...sometimes....’

viper in this situation would have extolled something about contract work here, both him and this girl seeming like performers in this.

‘hey it’s alright’ she reaches over to my knee, a slight husk in her voice. ‘there’s no one else but us’

as she hovered close to me, there was a warmth in the pulse of her neck, in fact this proximity felt as if the signals that comprised my body, my psycho-silhouette could rest itself somewhere in her flesh that wasn’t like the static that planed into flesh but rather, it was almost a complete incarnation so powerful that every other being around us suddenly became little more than shadows. she then takes my hand.

‘i think we should talk somewhere more private, don’t you think?’

she led me to the exit, green shone from the sign above, us appearing spilled on the metal surface until she opened





the door into nothingness. soon she walked ahead, darkness that lightened into blue from a soft raspberry tearing itself out of the ground and as she walked into its light, her clothes dissolved and she turns towards me, arm concealing her breasts looking shyly away sometimes in an affectation that contrasted her forwardness, also part of the metadata based on the descriptor of 'shy in non-public situations' a pluck at the exfil cord within my inventory surfaced just slightly but i conceal it, flattening my nerves by walking towards her.

'mmm...a gun? so you like that kind of stuff huh?' she said.

'n-no...i just have these as personal defense, i guess you can say i'm a little nervous. mental fluctuation i guess.'

'i'm not scared. you can cut me, you can even kill me. you can do whatever you want here' she said in a low sultry voice that becomes a whisper as she blew on my neck. she moved around me almost as if watching her from behind a screen, her touch flattened against it until they left these vague traces across the surface in my mind yet they reached through, , her fingers flattening the lances of signals that coaxed the shape of my face in her



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2VM
HPECENV2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1B1CE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2NM
0N12
VR10N4
WVENV
DOTOBE
E1
FVBOBE
M1N1
1WCID1D0
1E4BOB
E1D2W0D
2E1DO
WEER11
VD1B12C1
10N
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOTOB
1B2NM
FOBEN

hands even as i tried to fortify my psycho-silhouette, but its glow merely warmed her half-lidded eyes, as she moved her hands to flow down my neck that felt, with no exaggeration, real in the way the smoulder of her veins left a coolness around us, her flesh dyed purple in the light as if flickers of past bruises and she lowered us onto the raspberry whose soft beads sank under our knees. when i became a consultant for tai shu, it gave me this model of a person who could drift coolly across servers or the real world, glimpsing them before moving in waltzes between buildings and she leaned forward into me until i couldn't move, this immobile body docile to her touch that confirmed us as exactly the same being as her, no, as data that made a person that resembled her that only knew how to act within these compromised positions. throat caught until the next breath activated the kill-switch chaff grenade, pulling the pin as if plucking a flower, a sudden motion, ceasing everything as feathers flew around in the end of a dream.

signals atrophy and i used the remains of it to slide away from her, and spawn the g3ka4 in my hands, grip cradled my fingers and i extend the collapsible stock until its pick-like heel seated itself in my shoulder and lean into it, taking hold of the grip and handguard. the woman fell





back, eyes widened, lips agape in horror spiking while she covered herself. darkness slipped away to unveil various users in animal masks who had the same properties as the woman, half moons shone across their chest, the throbs in them nourished by the necks tightened to siphon blood that coursed throughout their body as they lifted their legs until they stampeded towards me, a tepid heat consumes any ozone that cooled us of these exertions.

with a swing of my arm, i send out several magazines of the g3ka4 sliding across the floor until their spring loaded plates kicked them upright, 7.62 x 51mm rounds sat at the top, sunrises within the night torn by the limbs of the approaching creatures, swinging in pendulums as i breathe out of its swing with the handguard flat against my fingers beamed under the shaft of the g3a3, its rear sight like a tooth as the rounds within were about to engorge into the flesh from the approaching onslaught and swept under their arms, coils of muscles like clouds, the front sight stretches its shadow across the chest of one from the muzzle flash, a 7.62 x 51 mm round drilled through their flesh, detonated into viscera, from their ripped limb, the bullet continued its trajectory to spear another user behind them, the single spoke within the sight's halo tracing the axis that swam around the pounces of the other users



until the air coated in red iron burnt up in the haze of gunpowder, and i'm merely a ghost flitting within their unseen irises from each pull of the trigger and they chased that figure, trying to claw at it but their hands seized nothing as wounds bloomed red petals within the leathery air steeped in the oil of their latex animal faces. my steps, each shot from the g3ka4 weaved a truss of 7.62mm x 51mm rounds that constellated them in smoke unravelling into the silver air, sculpted in the detonations of gunpowder whose light carved torsos, arms and animal heads amidst these expulsions of spilled veins and haggard breaths, the sobs of the woman crouching, trying to hold the heat of her limbs intact much the same as my own hands grasping the battle rifle, the seed of an ejection port bursts into ghastly roots of a world that reduced us to whispers in the choked expulsions of rounds loaded into the chamber, severed flesh blushing the motes within the powdery air cooling as ripples of smoke fall on my skin like snow.

ejecting the final shell, the g3ka4 locks empty, clawed hands thrust toward me, a horse mask's snout crushed against the air and i step around them swinging the barrel into their inner knee and the horse head caved, whipping my shin into them, the kick sent them to the ground, before they can stand i rip the charging handle back, pull-



ing the paddle to lock the chamber open and slide the magazine from the ground into the bladed opening of the magwell juttied down the receiver and i slap the paddle, the charging handle slides above the handguard to shove a round in the chamber as the impact reverberates this new found heft into the grip before taking hold of the rifle within the throes of recoil from the 7.62x51mm round shredding through the head of another creature, this infinite distance and these bodies whose little deaths and throbs of life ripple towards us. limbs little more than an instrument as even its leg's rotation pivots me towards the other beasts gathering. pulling the trigger contracted all movement and i simply eddy amidst the dim arms shattering before me yet heat rose within me like tar wrapped around my legs until i stumble slightly, holding myself still as i dispatch a few more creatures before diving out of the way, hauling myself out of the wake of the flesh peeled back from the bodies rolling beside me tripping from the impact of the 7.62mm x 51mm round upon their centre of mass.

aleppo had not arrived, the small amount of signals could not facilitate anything like step-transfer or loading more ammunition. strain unwound at my limbs until aches wracked at me. even the g3ka4 would be victim to its recoil



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1B1CE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2NW
0N12
VR10N4
WVENV
DOROVE
E1
FVBOVE
W1N1
1WCID1D0
1EML0V
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WVET
211
DOROV
1B2NW
ROVEN

in my limp hands but i had to maintain this signal, almost a prayer, something that would form the curvature of my skull and therefore trace the endless turns of this world and even across the wired some grace that pulled from one signal to another. muzzle flashes breathed smoke from the barrel as my fingers twitch out of the pool of recoil enveloped around me until signals wrap under my feet allowing me to haul myself as virtual space spreads around us, surfaces fold into a box around me, the woman and two users within its dimensions. step-transfer propels me away from the chicken mask and the dog mask standing within the sights of the rifle until all lights cut out and i could no longer hear anything but a slight tremor. soft muzzle flashes but i couldn't see any flicker of the users in them, being more of an application of force that throbbed inside this box, only imagining the mechanics within the unseen mechanics of the unseen suppressed rifles whose bursts eviscerated within its range engulfed them into the dust of gunpowder and it seemed this network of smoke was enough to whisk us away, its heat already receding into a warmth that could seemingly hold the world, or better yet ordain it in a netted cradle whose threads all connected somewhere, pulsing rhizome of all the life that we hoped to live in, holding close even amidst the things that break and crumble within it, stars flashing out of discarded





shell-casings, their chime tolling throughout space from the unseen collisions on earth.

light blinks on and alleppo stood amidst the aftermath. bodies of the users bled on the ground peppered with red dyed petals of flesh torn from 7.62 x39mm rounds. glancing each side of the box, figures in grey sank behind the surface. alleppo checked the woman who shuddered to his touch as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

‘you aight?’ he asked.

‘y-yeah...’

signals sealed off a triage area that encompassed us. this was something familiar for recon teams back when black-boxing was still common, using these triage structures they could inject themselves in a server space with a kind of structure that could absorb the host’s information and whereabouts should the operator be able to control the space. with the weakened signals, alleppo must have been easily able to take it over with his own psycho-silhouette rendering it impenetrable.

‘you know, i used to live out some of my life in this triage structure. i’d walk but i’d only go so far. then when i’d

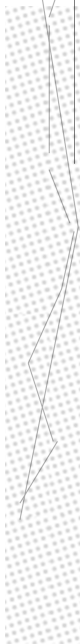


touch the surface, all it did was press into my flesh. there was a limit to me in the same way all this data don't reach anyone. all it does is point...'

'yeah, things are references. i guess in a way, signals are more than just the pieces of virtual space but our own experiences'

'somehow, the only thing untouched is this so called human that everyone keeps putting away from the wired. this supposed figure. in this triage space i wondered what that was. even in the conflicts, i wondered about it too...'

aleppo put his hand on the wall and glided it off its surface, his iris spread the luminescence apart into twin crescent moons that bounded the night not unlike fluorescent light in my own room that, upon entering the wired, carved the virtual plazas into these familiar public spaces with channels through rooms, booths, tables or even on the steps where users gathered, their connections bounced off each of them in bright rays off their contours glazed in light that already flickered past where we stood amidst it all, dimming just the slightest as they got further away. saturna taught me as i attempted to thrust my strikes, she raised her elbow until these strikes were like retreating umbras to which with the rotations of my limbs and from the re-





ceding impacts against them i could slip around and she smiled saying, 'yes a little bit like that' where our strikes were forces spreading to each other, emanating off of us.

'alright, let's introduce ourselves to the silk road client'

'hope they got some chairs or something'

'knowing them, we probably have some lawn chairs out in some bombed out ruins' alleppo laughed setting up the triage space to send to the hospital while the dimensions of the triage grows in size, speckled in glints off a fluorescent light above drenched the empty room in white.

'what the hell is this?' i ask.

'no bigs, they probably left signal traces, he said as he shared his os with mine, brushing aside white foams until the shadows unveiled familiar looking limbs with fingers, several threads and innards hovered in the air around us until a faint scent of flesh ranked the air. 'oh shit...'

'this place, it's an organ dump.' i said.

'fuck...' alleppo managed uncovering more marks of vis-



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2M
HPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
D112
VR10NV
WVENV
DOTOBE
E1
FVBOBE
W1N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOTOB
1B2NW
ROBEN

cera across the walls and floor, wireframes tracing several carts, preservation jars and cadavers that could incarnate themselves out of the signals into the images of torture livestreams, gore posts and extreme fetish content that stained the wired's blue light that tattered into scars and viscera that peeled themselves from the static of smooth limbs like pale rivers frothed in red that sent sobs stabbing into one's chest until it just felt like watching fruit get cut and the endless light burned up figures in its glow just waiting to swallow up everything whether through gunshots or blades, victims simply bowed over after facing a firing squad in a row of constant tragedies under a cyclic sun that we seemingly had to extricate ourselves from until its glow merely grazed our limbs carving themselves from this world even as it permeated into ours, sometimes forming radical splinter groups that would raise entire orders against the wired but merely become nodes. this separation of the user from the activity of the wired was how the psycho-silhouette would be formed within individuals and how things such as atrocity or violence swept over us, leaving its marks or becoming a looming figure that flitted across our light that could grow and manipulate signals around us, our own territories that expanded underneath us and in them, would we begin to understand another. but alleppo merely investigated and i step outside





the door, drawing the vp70 , white light dipped atop the stock aiming the machine pistol, an arch ramped into the shaft of the slide until it domed into the hull of the muzzle, the only thing that kept me stable was the sights like staring between buildings. signals sucked onto the wall like sand in undertow while we checked each empty room, the hallway a spine of a milky invertebrate and we white blood cells that navigated its marrow, seizing upon any shadow that encroached upon it, yet the fatigue within my body did not subside as even the pistol in front of melted into black smeared on my vision as i try to force myself to move, climbing out of the maw of this encroaching heat.

clearing up a moment, shadows emerge out of the wall, two operators in faceless masks bespectacled by spider eyed goggles wearing body armour open fire with sub-machine guns of an unknown make but their long tubed receivers and short barrels with ergonomic grips that slithered into their gloved hands.

pulling myself into one of the rooms, i lean out to pull the trigger, the burst fire drove the stock in my shoulder but i was on the defensive as this was only a futile attempt to keep them back as they had more than enough ammunition to make an approach. glancing to the corridor i leaped



and a step transfer threw me forward but as i get up, a single bullet embeds itself in my body armour pushing me to the ground, the reaction causing me to pull the trigger of the vp70 as i kept pulling the trigger to unleash burst fire vollies that could push them back, a silhouette appeared momentarily in front before disappearing in smoke as the operator stumbled back into cover as did i.

‘hey, now, you know it’s hard to think with all the noise’ alleppo said walking to the hall with his arms out, the two operators leaned out with their grease guns upon their so willing target yet as they pulled the trigger, the ratatat of their weapons sank into a faint beat as the first bullet whizzed past alleppo but the subsequent hail of 9mm rounds slowed down around him until they melted into orbs of light that shone on his brown face lacking the lustre of an avatar as he walked forward, weaving past the ghastly rails behind the bullets while the operators still fired as if nothing happened but as their weapons locked back empty to reload, they must have thought something amiss or perhaps waited for alleppo to collapse unable to stand against 9mm rounds that should’ve pierced him several times but as one of them turned, alleppo’s psycho-silhouette surrounded them, the first operator taken by surprise, attempted to pull the trigger of his grease gun but





his finger only hovered in the air unable to move, alleppo slid his arm underneath the inner elbow and in a single tug, the barrel of the grease gun turned upward. realizing what was happening, the other operator drew back, signals carved his shape out of alleppo's grasp as his own movement started to break slip out only for to hear the roar of the .45 acp round that entered his shoulder, tumbling to the ground and alleppo completed his maneuver with his hk45 held askew around the first operator's head pointed at the doorway whose frame provided all the space he needed to hit his target, grey ribbons unravelled from the threaded barrel as the slide sprung forth again like a sword withdrawn.

syrupe signals around me diminish as alleppo made a call to someone from his os for an extraction but another set of steps approach. before i could intervene, sliding on the ground in front of the operator, a shotgun blast punts the them to the ground and alleppo held his closed fist in the air as i saw a mannequin holding a benelli super 90 shotgun, its barrel in its grey hands before disappearing into the white light. sometimes, i thought of a part of my mind that was untouched by the glow of the wired, even the glimmering limbs shorn off or the paling faces, but even then this slow creeping of life from the dying gun-



man soon tainted this consciousness as if a connection driving itself into me with its final twitches and i could only grasp the vp70m tighter, hoping the polymer could swallow me into a black umbra that could distance myself from everything. lights stretched into beams that tracked scan-lines across my eyes until darkness met them, an evergrowing heat within me that perhaps my consciousness was trying to crawl out from my contours to cool itself from, the shade within my closed eyes.

‘yo, you good?’ aleppo sent word to my internal os.

‘yeah...just, need a second.’

soon, some individuals arrive from alleppo’s vanguard team who stabilized the condition of the operators as alleppo placed his hand on them, gaining any needed information. a familiar face walks up to me and offers their hand.

‘causing trouble out here?’ spider smiles.

‘hardly, i’ve mostly been sitting here.’

‘come on, don’t you know the most guilty parties are the ones not involved in the fighting?’





‘that’s too many tragedies...’

‘no doubt’ he said as he glanced the rooms getting the other units to clear and cordon off the area. aleppo takes me to the elevator and we head down to the entrance, several g-wagon suv’s whose circular headlight sunk in blocks that stretched into the fenders. just between them, the large grille sat under the hood, a tapered lid before the windshield, tinted panes along the sides. nearby toyota land cruiser suv’s with wheel arches like the paws of cats playing with a ball parked alongside them as electric signals breathed users into the air dacia speaking with a few of them but as static foamed on my back a sudden slap on my shoulder jarred me to face a girl in a with a t-shirt over long sleeves and pants with buckles. her hair may have been tied back but i recognized her nonetheless.

‘saturn...’ i said before realizing that she wouldn’t respond to just a normal greeting, always waiting for me to finish any kind of thought even if it was sudden, although she was probably playing as always, watching me struggle to make stiff long responses. ‘what’d you hit me for? can’t a simple hello suffice or something?’

‘don’t i always dishevel your life a little?’



'i'm on business'

'oooookay.' she shrugged sending me weapon statistics on my os.

'you always concocting something in the air ma ' aleppo nodded.

'jiang hu means rivers and lakes, and they evaporate in the summer.'

'yeah, yeah aigh 'so what you doin' around here'

'well, i heard from viper about what happened to foxtel and thought i'd visit as all. i didn't know they were on a case.'

'it's...kinda complicated...'

'oh...' she said and then looked to alleppo. 'i suppose even the crimes of the old world still linger, don't they?'

'unfortunately. but no regret is gonna lead us out of it that's for sure.'

'you're right about that' she said before placing her hand on my wrist and whispered 'i'm here now, don't worry.'





soon she enjoined the crowd again but i could catch glimpses of her and that even on the wired, she flickered within it like an illusion but in the moments she disappeared, her breath still lingered there before her next appearance. we walked over to aleppo's car, a rear engine sports car, sleek hood between long rolls where the headlights sat at the end, a tall windshield leaned on the slope of a glass triangle at the tip of the slanted window before the roof. before we could slip in, someone approaches us with a sony video camera with the fold out display and i could already imagine us in its overbright screen, the jittery motions that people claimed real.

'excuse me...you're the military man? mr. aleppo?'

'sorry man, i'm a little busy.'

before i could call saturna on internal os, aleppo sends a message cutting a quick glance.

'i saw them approaching. you wouldn't be present for an art exhibit?'

stepping forward with enough electric signals to catch me, i appear before the reporter my hands near my thigh holster and i approach slowly.



‘he said he wasn’t interested in commenting, this is not a discussion.’

‘why?’ is he hiding something?’

‘better question, why are you here.’

‘is that alertness?’ is there a combat sitch in there?’ why is this area constantly hiding its violence?’ perhaps someone should intervene?’

realizing what he was doing, i found myself more alone as this reporter waited for me to further serve his intended purpose that even on the wired felt thick and swarming but instead, my lips close, a smirk that held itself so they could see what they wanted to see.

‘you do realize how i closed the distance between us just now? think about what i can do to you right now. that camera has weight to it, even in a self defense scenario. all i have to do is either get close or get far enough away.’

threatening me? what do you think you’ll get out of that



huh? unruly behaviour must be a common trait here isn't it? this place needs proper order to sustain its business interests ' he said as he peered into his camera and i must've appeared that antagonistic, that self within the display but before i could do anything, a young vietnamese man in a loose white jersey threw his arm around the reporter.

'hey! you made it! i wanted to show you something!'

despite the protests of the reporter, he was quickly shoved away to some distant bloom of light from the sculptures around the front of the apartment complex and dacia followed pointing at her eye, before flicking her finger to point at us and i simply nod, these several glances we appeared in hoping that in a few them, we would be a part of us that we hoped to be.

sparkles of electric signals left a faint mist, not enough to materialize anything but enough to keep personal interfaces active. despite this, around the corner, i see a bulge in the air parted in the middle, contracting slightly like a whisper, and two ovaloid shapes bore out of the light frequency and a mouth opens yet before i can even think to do anything, it disappears, and my hand already reached for the thigh holster which aleppo looked over.



‘yo you good?’

‘i thought i saw something, like a face’

‘a face?’

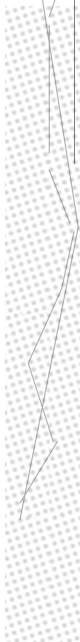
‘yeah’

‘hm...’ he said watching but nothing appears in the same spot but he enters the car as i send him the faint image off direct retinal capture. rear engines rattled, its high whinny roared from the pistons until it became pure motion that allowed us to fly through the streets.

‘sorry about all that.’ i said to aleppo regarding the reporter.

‘nah, it happens...we just ought to be careful about how we’re perceived, even as we show out, someone’s gonna get in our face about it, using it as an excuse to pry into this place. that’s why this place is so strict on visitors. we’ve already seen enough people trying to cause a scene. now that we have this internal problem, it makes things more difficult. we can’t even track this dude or who is leaking a backdoor.’

‘yeah, i can imagine. being put on public like that is sub-





ject to a lot of things. the wired especially'

'well, with the wired, the creation of this kinda server state was like a dream you know? like the irradiated skies where we could actually live how we wanted, be perceived in the way that we need to be. that was what it was all about, not to be a world that simply just stared down at us getting handled over and over. it's like we kinda got our own personhood back you know, only took a whole change in reality to do that.'

even as i entered the real world, there always seemed a part of us that ran amok somewhere causing all kinds of malice in other people's worlds, the parts of us we left with them but in this car i hoped somehow, we could cross through these distances between people in full even if we didn't know what we wanted to be yet, but something that assured us that they'd be near whether in these buildings sifted through us or the nodes across the electric signal dripped on the window as if its own kind of touch.

radiated from a single rail of a signal generator behind



2
LVCIGI2I
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
GILNEBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EYVAIDY
NIBICE2
23E
202BENDI
J2NW
DRI2
VRIDN
WVENW
DOROVE
E1
FVBOVE
W1N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
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10W
COM2ECIE
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211
DOROV
1B2NW
ROVEN

wall panels light spilled onto brown tinted surface, the restrained glow emitted enough signals to operate simple interfaces within the hospital's corridor. many facilities were converted to host servers which were already based on the designs of public plazas. this conversion was done through replacing materials with signal conductive polymers, transmission beams and trusses within the walls until they webbed beneath these surfaces, these facilities maintained a sheen from the virtual spaces flickering in the signals bathing these halls and those of us that remained in the empty spaces between these beams, between these transfers that glinted from the table sattelites. i remembered reading about hospitals and offices having a similar neutrality and clinical nature with grey-blue tiles, white desks, palettes out of cubicle panels where administrators and doctors sat with desktop monitors storing patient records, hosting customers and patients alike. perhaps, this corridor too was a leftover of that age with its light, our steps bathed in this white river but the glow couldn't reach the vertices of each panel, shadows of the earth crept at the vertices, or better yet serrated contours of frequencies around this flow of signals.

we get to the door of the patient room and alleppo places his hand on it, tracing a sigil and patching into its comms,





saying he's here to ask a few questions from the vanguard team, we walk through a field as if we came from the soil and this was the world we could bloom into with grasses hardly resting from the wind's throes, the woman from the silk road server stands there, wind blowing her blazer cuffs around her wrists,

'man, can't someone think of something original in these patient rooms?' aleppo glanced at his surroundings only to see holographic van gogh flowers with the brush strokes subtly shifting, the large afternoon blue glowing in his eyes.

'hey...' the woman greeted and i only nodded to her, maintaining some professional distance.

'my name's alleppo, this is foxtel. i'm from the vanguard team. can we ask some questions?'

she only looked away and nodded, i could only imagine how little she wanted to appear to anyone after seeing how her body was used in the silk road server, only having whatever she could hold on to in the real world, its solemnity and perishability of her flesh assuring herself it's the only one of her.



‘what did you see before you were abducted.’

‘i saw someone who looked like me. it wasn’t possible but it felt real. i chased them into a room but after that, i was in darkness. i saw a face of a being that looked like this.’

she forwarded direct retinal capture and in the darkness hovered the face and it was no doubt the same face i glimpsed earlier after intimidating the reporter.

‘alright, that’s all we’ll ask.’

‘w-wait...that’s it?’

‘yeah. i imagine you want some time to recover. we’ve already disturbed you enough anyway.’ alleppo wrapped up but the woman’s voice caught, her question hovered in the air.

‘are there others...?’

‘...yeah...but we’re getting to it.’

‘okay...’ she said.

‘you got friends to see you soon?’

‘yeah...’





‘good’ i said and i hoped that this was enough to assure her as i go with alleppo to the exit. at the car, i check the chamber of the vp70m machine pistol before setting it in the stock holster at my thigh.

‘that face appearing is something we gotta look into. no doubt.’

‘yeah, but it doesn’t look like its linked to an avatar, it doesn’t even have any material’

‘yeah, that’s the hard part. well i’ll get vanguard teams to look for the recent missing people but that’s only half of it.’

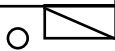
‘what’s the other half’

‘we gotta consult one of the churches on this one’

‘w-what?’

‘yeah, because if there’s psyches that are facing decay creep or a user that can’t be tracked, we might have to enter the afterlives , someone might know.’

‘alright, so what do we do now?’



‘same thing, keep the thread open and i’ll come to you. but whoever they’ll copy, we’ll need to stay ready and apprehend.’

‘alright, keep me updated’

walking the street, arches emboss the entrances of the grey buildings as if an old world encased in a block of fog where distant cars ebbed between the conversations beyond until they spilled out from around the corner, passersby threw a glance, a remote glint of light off their eye before they rotate back into the waves of the crowd, and in those seconds their faces seemed like statues carved out of static and passing each intersection, a different face appeared just outside this street that stitched the gatherings here over a wound that parted between the tire smoke, the flashes of red lights almost a kind of heartbeat and the distant users hoping to touch upon these rough expulsions of life around them. as i looked over a figure stood in front of me, rays of signal lights shining around their silhouette almost like a keyhole but soon it grew sleeves from a long foxhound jacket and as i peer into its face, my contours seize themselves as if to confirm the curvatures of my vision, staring at my own eyes, the slightest crease within the jacket sleeves as my nerves rush into the thigh



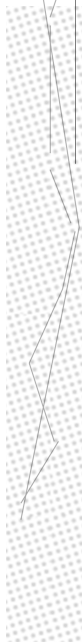


holster, finger pulls the trigger of the vp70 until it was only us within the light of the muzzle flashes, recoil dissipates into us until we become mere motion gliding amidst the concrete.





2
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AET
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VCCNM2VM
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COMWODO
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EVBVID0
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2025ENDI
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VDIBI2CI
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COM2EC1E
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T0B00





Name: Marzanna Etnexheyr

Sex: female

Occupation: journalist

Blood type: A

Likes: weird people, serendipitous encounters, convenience store food, window shopping, old Miwa sutras, tall girls, impressing people who think she's an idiot

Dislikes: journalistic cliché, popular religious enthusiasm, snobbery, liquor so hard you can't taste it, heavy Elthazan food

Theme song: Rush - The Pass

Most people who graduate from Yn Dahh't, one of the proudest collaborations of historical more-than-friends Klauxion and Miwa, become the journalistic equivalent of super spies. In fact super spies don't really exist under the Pious Alliance of Humanity; Yn Dahh't journalists are maybe the closest thing there is. Its alumni investigate Dark rings

IT'S A GOOD THING
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)



and shapeshifter outbreaks, emerging cults and heresies, corporate malfeasance, government and Ecclesia factions seeking the drop on each other. There is technically a culture stream but Marzanna double majored in the investigative stream for the career opportunities, plus an extra course of monastic arts every year “just for fitness” (she genuinely enjoys the practice), and it was the clearance she got fresh out of school in Winter City that came with the instructions on how to receive and follow coded messages from an Ecclesiastical branch that as far as she knew, before and after clearance, didn’t exist.

So how did someone like this get to the point of being interested in a “story” like Luskonneg?

Marzanna was flagged by a spiritual counsellor for being hypersexual as a child (sending imitations of adult cards to her classmates and threatening to pee



on her enemies). Her frightened parents - lay members of a patrilineal Miwa cult that had floated on the edge of heretical anathema, stuck in the bureaucratic process, for half a century - enrolled her in martial arts training. The problem itself was resolved quickly, but turned out to be the tip of an iceberg of a guileless, naive frankness that dangerously dominated her personality - including aggression. Martial arts, however, proved to be the most exciting thing in her life so far, and to keep practicing she enrolled in Yn Dahh't. A full-time monastery, or competitive pankration, would have been too austere for her - the problem was she didn't like journalism all that much either. Controlling her impulses (particularly sexual - she followed the Monastery's mostly nominal rule against dating to the letter) by becoming relatively withdrawn, she nonetheless succeeded academically enough to prevent this fact from sinking in.

Being flagged over something so vulnerable at such a young age made her wary of confiding too much in spiri-

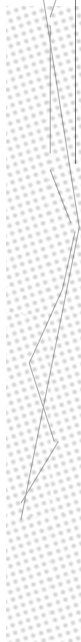
tual counsellors, and she turned to another place to help understand herself: Punkin Patch. Her natural personality came out in her posts and no one judged her for it. The stereotype of a Punkin Patch user is someone desperately trying to ignore the failure of their own life or social skills by gawking at people who have it worse than they do, and to an extent this was true for her, but she thought of it more as a process of trying to understand people like herself, and when she put it that way in a post even she knew was risky almost no one objected. (A modified form of the post still circulates as the copy-pasta “Scarecrows [slang term for Punkin Patch users] Have Hearts Too”.) At some point it struck her that if she could get anything out of the kind of investigation she was learning at Yn Dahh’t, it was whatever she was getting out of Punkin. She specialized into the culture stream, and her graduating project was unorthodox and controversial but one of the most praised in her year - a front secret-sharing network who were then approached to share their stories under each other’s names, merged into a common narrative of events



in the school, including several involving people not explicitly part of the experiment. One professor suggested she become a novelist, but though the Each Other Project was elaborately literary in structure, she does not consider herself creative enough.

Since graduation, she has not figured out a way to replicate the Each Other Project's success (and has resisted on principle the proposal of several publications to simply repeat it in an adult setting). This means that after almost 5 years, she has not even started a Journeyman's Project - the cornerstone of her permanent license - and is nearing the end of her Establishing Grant.

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2026EAD1
1B20W
0012
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M0E0W
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M101
1WC1D1D0
1E0B0
E102W0D
2E1 D0
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1B20W
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it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!


Synopsis

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



Last Time

Iuskonneg goes outside and once again faces humiliations
and a world that seems all too real, as his innate powers
and fragile sanity begin to tremble



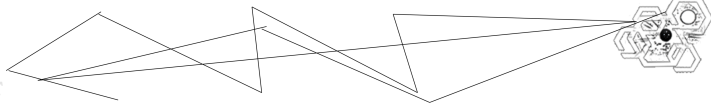
CW: online stalking communities, cigarettes, drug use, altered states of consciousness, suicidal ideation, self-harm, emotional incest, violent intrusive thoughts, underage sexuality, incel ideology, COCSA, panic attacks, captivity, psychological torture, interrogation, OCD/scrupulosity, religion

Marzanna refreshed the tab to no avail. The Punkin thread on that guy she'd pulled over at the cafe the other day had disappeared - and Punkin by design didn't get archived by other sites. The government archived it somewhere, everyone knew. But Punkin wanted to be able to comply with legal demands to take content down to the letter. And if it bored their users, they wouldn't let a thread continue to disgrace their archive.

She had called last night and forgotten about it. She hadn't even been drinking, just gotten in a really convoluted argument with someone she hadn't seen since the

FAILURE 05: INDIGESTION OF MEMORY

2
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AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
QINEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVIDV
NIBICE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
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VRIDNV
WVENW
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ROVEN



monastery on the phone. She must have done it in one of those fits of remembering she had while she was distracted by something, which never got her started on the thing she'd been putting off because she'd only think about it as long as she was putting off something else.

But he hadn't picked up. Which was good, because she hadn't done any background on him yet. Which was bad, because it looked like her only lead on background had disappeared.

Which was good, because it gave her a reason to give up on this hook and the embarrassing memory of how she'd obtained it.

Which was bad, because there was something there she really wanted to know more about.

Just before he had put his finger up, when he had been huddled to shade himself from any hint of the world, she had sensed something around her. At the same time as she leaned in to watch for any hint of weakness, it felt like he was looming over her. The peculiar sense, not only of this double defence, which was common in the unconscious human body language decoded by the monks, but of it from, somehow, several directions, made her conscious





enough to perform a reflexive rhi attack check and detect the energetic outlines of ten hands, hovering near her. Some were balled up into fists, some readied to grip, some holding out a firm or gentle touch. They were arrayed in an decagonal formation along a subtle dimensional parallel only known in advanced theoretical kata she'd studied to waste time in her graduating year.

She had never seen a technique like that, in standard magic or Miwa monasticism. Although one emotional association was obvious - the ten "hands" of the Dark Lord, the magical monster-weapons by which he administered the causality of his territories.

Pure association didn't necessarily make something Dark magic, but the Ecclesia ruled on it all the time.

In either case, that guy didn't seem functional enough to learn anything that advanced. And with no indication how he would have cast it.

She knew Dark cults did weird things, though. Human experimentation.

She had told herself that wasn't what she was going to end up doing. She wasn't desperate enough to use that



Ecclesia contract she had signed, to actually go to Confession and say that password - wait, did that obligate her to report something like this? It was sitting under a pile of old magazines and drafts she'd been working on when they'd approached her and torn out crosswords and flyers for experimental banquets.

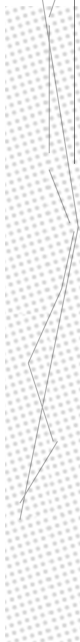
It didn't matter, she didn't have anything she could prove if she was. Maybe he had an illegal ward or something, that didn't even make her curious, or wouldn't until she understood what kind of life it slotted into. She wasn't a True Crime idiot.

But the True Crime idiot, nay, the creepypasta idiot, in her, it beckoned.

Not that it had even beckoned enough for her to double back and confirm his real destination - which had to be close by because of how underprepared for the cold he was!

Could she stake out the area? Fuck no, she was too lazy, and on this story it would feel humiliating.

What kind of guy that pathetic, verging on public masturbator, tries to avoid leading a deus ex machina beautiful





fighting girl saviour back to his falling-apartment?

Unless he didn't think she counted as beautiful, which she'd rather not be counted as by a guy like that, probably.

She picked up the cigarette she'd bought to lean into pretending to be a detective, if she really had to.

But she had already forgotten to ask him for his name!

She'd had two so far. She was getting into the zone of studying her own cough patterns.

Her roommate was coming back in ten minutes. She had to put back the dozen books she had pulled down and rifled through since she had woken up at 1:00 in the afternoon (after said roommate had left). The bookshelf itself, with a rough ancient lace curtain that pulled back and forth across it, was inherited and half the items on it her roommate had never read. They were owed some audience.

In theory, she'd been reading up on Dark networks a generation ago. Of course, she'd ended up skimming a police procedural that was mentioned in the introduction and happened to be on the shelf (in several volumes). Then she'd pulled out a dozen pages of notes and tried to re-



write them in its style.

Then she'd got the idea of going out and buying cigarettes into her head.

She couldn't understand exactly how she could have gotten like this, which made it harder to think of getting out.

She had been an ace as a student. Right up into her last year of her basic diploma. She'd made just a brush-stroke short of her rival for valedictorian who wasn't lesbian enough to care about as a rival properly, and taken a clearance exam for Winter City because she hated heat. Ever since then her life had been slowly disintegrating, pieces so small falling away one at a time that if she tried to explain any one of them she'd sound too hard on herself.

The only place she could go to make sense of it was Punkin Patch.

Part of the problem was, when her addiction was her job, that didn't make it any easier to treat it as a job and not an addiction.

It wasn't quite her job anyway. It had felt like a betrayal of her standards when she had pitched a story about Punkin





Patch itself, and it had still been rejected, not just by a publication but by the Ecclesia. There had been stories about the Patch before - they were surface level and catered to people's preconceptions about the internet. Apparently that was how somebody wanted them.

She straightened her back, breathed in and out, gathered her rhi into her diaphragm.

Breathed in and out, circulating the rhi through the higher-dimensional structure of her body until she felt like a strange attractor of looping, pulsing light, and could direct any pulse of this light instantly anywhere in an infinitesimally detailed wireframe of her physical shape whose halo of possible movements and force outputs she could perceive all at once.

Then she leaned into the desk, sighed, and reopened the Punkin window.

Honestly, was she getting distracted from being distracted?


The weirdo from the Thistle was a long shot, her closer bet was trying to pull leading details from the Kissler case.

The Kissler was a costumed lurker on a number of anonymous chat site who paid other users to act out kissing each other, coordinating meetings with a magically entangled clock app (one site had changed its randomization to add a timed waiting element to disrupt this strategy, which they considered an exploit to its core functionality). The arrangements were all strictly consensual, so there wasn't much to be done about it legally. As far as anyone could prove, all the participants were of legal age, although there were rumours - rumours that were complicated by the fact that Punkin Patch users were no longer convinced there was only one person using the costume (horned purple heart mask, inflated pink lips, maroon silk bat-wing collar pointed with bells). Others thought the original was an employee at one of the sites, explaining his grasp of their technical vulnerabilities and their reluctance to do anything about him.

Punkin had been trying for months to dox him but there was no way they were good enough to do it without the skills of a trained journalist in their midst - an Yn Dahh't journalist, at least; they could probably run circles around most of the journalists up here. Which, if she broke key details herself, would make it more of an investigation of her own and less of an autoethnography of internet drama;



plus the story, though she couldn't think about this too much without wincing, was garish enough in its scandal to attract the attention of people who read the newspaper and watched state-produced seasonal plays and went to office jobs and thought about nothing else. And there were a lot of those in her supposed audience, albeit in part because the seasonal plays in Winter City were a labour of love, a product of hundreds of people organically coming together in the precarious warmth of a cold country, so genuinely warm they didn't even stop each other's tiny contributions of inspiration from glimmering together like fresh snow.



Kissler recorded against a featureless beige wall flickering in candlelight, so there was no way to geolocate. Combining through every word of his banter had produced one reference to a product that situated him - at least one of him, and probably the main one - somewhere in the Mud Valley on the inland border between Elthazan and Silmenon. To extract more information, users were now planning to catfish him. Marzanna, of course, had to get in on this - adversarial interviewing techniques were a martial art unto themselves taught at Yn Dahh't. But a faction of posters had ganged up on her because they saw her as insufficiently dedicated to the cause of ruthless doxing, even



though none had thought to go after her or guessed at her real identity and reasons for involvement. One of the most popular participants had threatened to quit the catfishing crew if she was included, and she was waiting on his DM to try and resolve it privately.

Waiting on one task, waiting on another task. There was always something to do, but it sometimes felt like an insult to try while the world wasn't cooperating.

She lit another cigarette, putting it into her mouth next to the other one which was down enough to singe her lips until she spat it into an ashtray across the table, catching the new one between her teeth. They were infused with lilac incense so at least the place would smell nice when her roommate came back.

In the process of spitting the one cigarette across the table, the other tumbled backwards, still lit, into her mouth.

It burned her tongue which tensed and twitched and stuck out but not fast enough for it not to fall back between her gum and the bottom of her mouth, singing somewhere sensitive enough that she coughed from the back of her throat. The more it bounced around, the more she coughed it back up, the more it stung and scratched and





made her cough. It felt like trying to dislodge a jumping beetle from her throat.

Reflexively, she stretched her shoulders apart, lined the first two fingers of each hand up with each other so that she could feel the invisible vibrating circuit jumping from one to the other, and exhaled a rhi breath that drove it spinning into the air above her face. One of her newly ready arms shot out, whipped it out of the air and into a black smudge across the face of the detective on the cover of her (roommate's) (vintage) mystery book. (Fuck.)

Maybe, she thought, being a virtuoso at manipulating her own rhi made her too confident doing stupid things.

She went to the bathroom to try and wet a tissue she could rub the smudge out with. When she came back a DM was waiting for her.

She felt the rhi disturbance from her hands first, the flows breaking down into a tingle of granular noise, and held her left hand in a mudra to try and stabilize it before it reached her head, while holding the right on the mouse just so it would display "typing" in the chat box.

>I am going to give you a piece of advice before you try



to talk about “the community”. Get off Punkin and lurk anonymous boards for a couple of years. I know you haven’t because people have to explain common turns of phrase to you every other week, and this has never given you a second thought. Learn what it’s like to genuinely forget you even have a name. “I” don’t have a beef with you. I’d probably get drinks if I met you in person. The fact that you think “the mission” is about personal agreement is proof you don’t get it. We have an invariant program of lulz and you don’t. And we can’t execute a mission this sensitive without absolute confidence in it.

She transferred the built-up rhi from the left hand across her shoulders and started typing furiously, her fingers literally a blur. what in the fucking LARP... Dark hunters in the Ecclesia don’t talk about their missions like that lol. anyway if it’s not about people then just pretend I’m not involved. I don’t have to be the “public face” or anything that was other people’s idea because I can talk normal. I posted my interview plan in the main chat. anyone can edit it. anyone can use it.

>ngl the fact that people were simping for you and getting excited for your face reveal was a big part of it, if that was off the table it might keep things more in spirit.



A vein popped on her forehead as she held her jaw rigid but slightly open. She didn't put in enough effort to be pretty to get noticed at parties, or last more than a couple of dates after waiting in the state matchmaker's queue for weeks, but just enough for incels to treat her like this...? once again, shouldn't the mission come first? how many other people do you have that even that freak would want to watch e-kiss someone?

>“The mission” this, “the mission” that. I've never even used that word, and you tell me I'm LARPing? Tell me what is the mission to you. What is even the end goal you want out of this.

That wasn't fair. Nobody talked about that on the forums, even in the public chat, to avoid saying anything incriminating. And she, of course - they were right about this - played along with their plausible deniability for her own ends.

Yn Dahh't journalists were trained to find ways to not have to do either of those things. But any such training emphasized that were situations where someone would detect you were doing this and pin you to one or the other, and you couldn't flinch at them. You had to have a model where you told the truth, and a model where you lied, and



immediately pick which was better. Ideally, you had a winning play in both.

Being honest was obviously risky here, but if she lied she might have trouble getting permission to write an article at all without discrediting herself further. She had been planning to avoid telegraphing her intention before they had some undeniable victory - Punkin users were always most open to publicity when they wanted to show off.

>I think this could become the kind of story that would define this site for a long time, and I don't want to commit to an absolute goal until everyone can talk about it first. again didn't think any of this even needed to be explained. the only thing that's non-negotiable to me is us - at least, us who put in all this work, maybe a bigger us, maybe even bigger than you're thinking of right now - getting to know Kissler's story, as a person, where all this information we've been collecting fits.

>*barf* hahaha holy shit that's gay. Legit thought I was just getting jealous of the e-girl for a bit there, thanks for proving my vibes right again. Story, person, fitting, who talks like that - we aren't here because we care about that kinda shit. We're here because it makes people stupid, which makes them funny. btw, can you pass the chat



this. A file took twenty, thirty seconds to upload. If we're talking interview plans anyone can use, give 'em this one and vote on it.

A monophonic, linear, procedural jazz piano line came on in a popup behind the browser window and she let it play as she squinted at the document. (Her hands unconsciously settled into the Fog Visits From The Next Valley form, transmuting her trepidation into a sense of wonder at what fresh meaninglessness the future would bring.) It would probably be wise to have her eggs in more than one basket again - which always made her feel uncomfortably like she didn't have any eggs in any baskets at all.

"I could swear you were sitting in the same position as you were this morning. Is that a meditation thing?" Her roommate's voice chimed behind her, sending a ripple through her higher-dimensional aura that somehow her opening the door and crossing the entryway hadn't. Her ability to go unnoticed like that, her rhi that unconsciously narrowed itself through space like a knife, was the first thing that had made her roommate interesting to her, despite her being in every other sense one of the least interesting people she had ever met. Beautiful, admittedly, not interesting, except... and she needed that kind of person as an



anchor in her life, a place from which to chart the strange dimensions and corners of space that (her last exchange showed, didn't it) mattered to no one but her.

"Wait - uwaaaah, what did you do to my book?" And before she could stammer out a reply, her almost weightless ponytail scudded away to the kitchen, a chain of cumulus, out of sight.

Luskonneg squinted at the messages on his phone and wondered how long he wouldn't be able to think about anything else.

With this ridiculous couple of weeks, he was now a full thirteen episodes behind on his seasonal anime schedule - the only schedule of any kind he was still keeping. (Even his sleep schedule was at this point rolling a twenty-sided die.)

He couldn't force himself to - the second he did that all the things he could force himself to do would collapse on top of him and crush him before he could pick another. The experience would probably lead to another round of unskippable incapacitation, anyway.

But this one shouldn't have even been hard. Just block the num-



ber. You are a shut-in. Act like it.

When people were arguing about whether shut-in-dom was voluntary or involuntary, you were the one who picked up your first hit post on Feed by saying it was involuntarily willed.

(That now just made him think of Llau, who quoted that all the time at big accounts even when it was a pain in the ass.

Remembering the encounter with Llau, he sat up from his barefoot squat on his mattress and threw himself headfirst at a wall but stopped himself, trembling, half a centimetre away, repeating three times before falling back on his butt with voluntarily involuntary lassitude, crushing a tissue box.)

The reason this was bugging him was that getting interviewed had been one of his last truly childish fantasies.

When he had started sharing his deranged internal monologue on Feed, when he'd first started to pick up his small audience, he'd conducted fantasy interviews in his head for hours. Usually it would be with one of those shitty web-based media outlets that ran on ads or microtrans-



actions (a couple were state-licensed now) and covered the ephemeral world of posting, or fanzines. He was reading a lot of profiles in those at that point, contemplating the lives it was increasingly clear he was never going to have. Rather than narcissism or excitement, the fantasy appealed to a simple, desperate need to sketch out a self before it disappeared into the grey currents of the web again. Sometimes in the fantasy he would project some alternate version of himself into the future; he would draw a gag battle manga based on Feed drama, or start his own online doujin work aggregator, or find a way to reproduce the Self Sword System in real magic... But it quickly became too much to suspend his disbelief in these scenarios. At a certain point he had to empty his imagination of himself to save it. The last times he had run the interviews in his head he talked about the same things he did on Feed; being a miserable shut-in. Enough people found that interesting there.

There was, however, a question that would come up in an interview that would never come up on Feed, and this was where his imagination balked: how did you get this way?

He tabbed over to the tracking window. If it kept going like this there was one desperate measure he could take to put



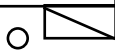


his life back on track.

With over three years NEET you were supposed to be unable to order from the Magical Academy Apothecary. However, Luskonneg's last psychiatrist had agreed to give him an automatically renewing, basically unlimited order just to keep him out of their hair. He kept tabs on the Drugs board, with research chemical threads being a particularly potent source of vicarious extreme experience for when he needed that to get the blood flowing in his veins again. There were two in particular he'd bookmarked to search across other boards when he was next in the mood - ZHX-1011 and Ambruxa.

Awww shit. It'd have been easier if there had been one. Now he'd have to decide...

But that gave him an excuse to look at the dozens of trip reports, and it turned out Ambruxa was specifically associated with the exact thing he wanted it to do: uncovering memories. He vaguely remembered this from the threads but hadn't saved the post numbers to prove it; indeed it was what had driven his mind blindly in the direction of this in the first place; the fact that he had been thinking this was exactly the kind of memory he was hoping to uncover with the help of Ambruxa; something that would



make his life, possibly, interesting to anyone else; something that would make him, possibly, a sympathetic character in it. Above all, he knew, if he was going to even consider telling a stranger about the things that made him a shut-in failure, he needed a trauma, a reason he was like this.

One Ambruxa user said, "I was hunched over the toilet trying to force out an absolutely agonizing shit, as happens to me on a near-daily basis and I never even allowed myself to think might be unusual before this; and then I remember having the bathroom door constantly opened by my siblings when they wanted to know where I was; trying to stay motionless so they'd ignore me, treating me like I wasn't there at all because the alternative was treating me like I was intruding on them instead of the other way around, laughing if I made a noise or telling me to cover up my lap. They always had an incomprehensible game going in the bathtub..."

He typed in his credit card number and prescription code, and ordered three caps of Ambruxa. There was an apothecary outlet in Winter City; it would deliver by the evening, probably. He wouldn't even have to think about whether he should have done it.



He had hoped expectation would unfreeze his mind, but it only made him more reluctant to do anything to pass the time.

The afternoon sank slowly in dimming blue light, which he tried to parse apart from the blue light of his screen, still stuck on the clinical white of the Ambruxa trip reports page. At intervals of about half an hour he'd go back to Skry to try and find another round of trip reports, with diminishing returns both in number and novelty. Eventually he started looking up ZHX-1011 instead and sickening himself with FOMO. ZHX-1011 was good for introspection but also tended to express its insights in elaborate visions and fictional narratives. There was debate over whether it was an ensorcelegen, in which case it would probably be restricted further from public access soon. Often ZHX-1011 users - including ones who weren't heavy gamers - described suddenly perceiving life as a video game, with tutorial audio hallucinations and floating stat blocks that measured dimensions of their personality and psychological capacities, grid layouts and flags.

It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to do that. It wasn't as if he didn't do that, to some extent, even without trying. But like everything else, it was a futile exercise in infinite re-



gression. He couldn't even pull a set of consistent rules out of abstract space to design a game himself - something he'd tried a few times in his first couple years alone, when he'd imagined his isolation as some kind of artistic retreat, a freedom from the distractions of work and school and meeting people's eyes. When he made himself aware of it he felt something huge out there trying to eat him (the Catfish-Whale from Hell Harrowing, maybe...) and the wall he bounced off was his, the only thing protecting him.

Now that sounded more like the kind of thing Ambruxa would help with.

And there we go! Ambruxa, let's say, would let him put [how many points?] into [what category would you call this? was it even the same category? just because something was dark and wait, was he just thinking about how the Catfish-Whale turned out to be the spirit of Astig's childhood cory? but that was just his first association, what if it was something actually alien and implacable and unrelated to him like the Wall Crawlers...], and ZHX-1011 would [no wait this didn't work, could he even frame access to the points system in terms of the points system? but it wasn't a given in the first place, it would have to be articulated in terms of probability, and the probability





that any drug would do to him what he read about in the trips interesting enough for someone to write up as a trip report, as opposed to just making one of his waifus almost feel close and heavy and the rainbow light pulse up and down his dick like in a cheap Miwa tantric illustration...]

Fuck, I can't even decide which drug I need to solve the problem of what drug to get!

It didn't come to him until after he had let out his frustration by watching a bunch of rage mod compilations, and got so worked up he started flailing around and socked himself in the nose. Lying sideways across his pillow (creased flat down the middle in the direction he normally lay on it), feeling blood bubble up with each exhalation through the ducts of a conch-shell of cum-stiff Kleenex, he thought, if the problems he was trying to solve entailed each other, what if they also solved each other?

The Apothecary also had a searchable index of drug combinations, but apparently even their researchers hadn't bothered to combine Ambruxa and ZHX-1011 before.

Of course he could just buy the two and try one then the other, but then he'd have to decide on the order, whereas a totally untested drug combination had the added benefit



that he might kill himself.

He stared at his shopping cart with the queasy, overfed relish with which he'd sometimes stare at a particularly good string of likes on his own Feed for several minutes before clicking "Check Out".

Luskonneg's hopes were already beginning to sink when he opened the bubble wrapped envelope both doses came in. The Ambruxa came looking like liquid amethyst in a little glass decanter shaped like a snail, a quaint Silmenon tradition you hardly even saw in anime about alchemists any more, while the ZHX-1011 was a pale blue pill hardly a millimetre thick and small enough to sit on a fingernail, overpackaged in its own hard plastic bubble so you wouldn't lose it unless, obviously, you flicked it across the room opening the plastic bubble.

These things were so overdesigned to the most banal aesthetic of their reputation, the reputation itself was probably as fake as the aesthetic. He wrote an increasingly outraged string of posts on Feed - up to seven - complaining about this, saved it to his drafts in case he was right, and then casually opened his deliveries, feeling perfunctorily





motivated to have the experience to complain about it. He had been trying to figure out if he wanted to do anything special for his trip before the mail bell had rang - before, that is, he had gone to sleep, and been woken up by the mail bell. It wasn't like he was going to go outside. Even sunsets and sunrises, from inside his room, felt oppressive and might feel more so on drugs (although the bell had woken him up in the late afternoon, and it would probably start hitting just in time for the sunset, so it wasn't like he was avoiding this either). There was a "Tails of the Comet Valkyries" movie he had been procrastinating on watching for months, but he'd just read a review saying it was bad. He'd contemplated the idea of trying to deliberately organize his story, his life, see if something would jump out that would be interesting to somebody, and immediately laughed it off. Well, that was the kind of thing he was hoping the drugs would make him able to do - but that meant if the drugs let him do it, he could let himself be pleasantly surprised, and didn't have to think about it until then. Otherwise he'd be thinking - not even that, but shocking his mind blank of thinking, chasing and getting chased in circles by thinking, pleading with himself to think and not have to think - when he started tripping, and that would be the worst thing.



Instead, he wasn't thinking at all. He imagined himself on a livestream (he would never facedox), dropping the ZHX-1011 into his densely lined palm from the ragged hole in its packaging he'd made with scissors and then making eye contact with the audience before popping the stopper (a sphere-topped crown of plastic crystal) out of the decanter and washing the one down with the other.

He had nothing better to do than open Feed. "i'm on drugs - ama"

But nobody was biting so he went back to the board, feeling outside himself (was this an effect already? it wasn't outside the range of his normal dissociation) as he watched himself slide into the recursion of reading trip reports to stimulate his own trip. They were having a wild day in any case - someone had tried "Gryphon Guano" and was playing tag with Shadow People, a whole posse of monks was failing to bully someone claiming Arquenon could open new rhi pathways, and people were tempting the banhammer speculating about the phenomenology of the Black Mushroom trip based on its chemistry. Reading stuff like this completely sober could take him out sometimes. There were things he would never try because just reading about them - even where the experience sounded pleasurable to



normal people who tried it - especially where the experience sounded pleasurable to normal people who tried it - would end invariably in him lying half on his stomach half on his side, pressing any available surface to any surface that would confirm it, trying not to vomit, trying not to

She was big and there was nothing else to it. Her eyes were pointed up at the ceiling and he would never see what was in them.

He slipped the string around his neck. She kept holding it. He slipped the end over the intersection and out under, one knot and then another, until about six pulled lazily together, squished ragged. He kept fidgeting with the "knot" until it got close to his neck. He pulled tighter and began to stand on his tiptoes, and stared up at her and beamed. He inched closer to her on tiptoes. He tensed every muscle in his body, as if he was doing the breathing exercise he had been given at school. The breathing exercises never worked because they reminded him of this. He had been sent into the coatroom to do breathing exercises because he had been unspooling into a puddle of static and slipped so far down his chair it banged out from under him. He had asked to go to the nurse for his ringing tailbone but



the nurse was busy. Then they had left him alone for for-
ly minutes, and he had been touching himself when they
checked back in. He couldn't explain that it was the only
way to let go of the tension once he started tensing - that
he couldn't get past the "tense every muscle" part of the
exercise - except doing this, which there was no way they
would be willing to do.

He had to stay like that until either some other thing got
the better of him - hunger, boredom, which proved there
had been nothing wrong at all - or she came all the way
to pick him up, and he would be able to move under the
loving despair of her gaze (which proved there had been
nothing wrong at all) - feel the vibrating metro seats mas-
sage life back into him - enough to last until they got home
and he could ask for his ritual - the only thing that worked.

"You won't tell dad about this, right?" he had thought to
ask one time.

"If I got the chance to tell your father anything," his moth-
er sighed, "no way in Chaos would I waste it on this."

He would throw his hands around the crease about a third
of the way down her waist, his head directly overhung by
her breasts.





She slowly allowed her arms to fall, until the flab was almost resting on his shoulders.

If they rested, the child's voice - five or six years old - would alternate between two sides of a scenario in a horror movie (wordless memories of being awake for hours under a blanket on the couch, the light of the television beckoning language): "Don't stop" - precocious menace like a serrated file - "please? please?" - a stumbling retreat up the twist and taper of whimper to the ledge of choke.

She sniffed, gurgled, lifted her arms again, winding the string backwards through the air until it hung almost straight aside from a couple of kinks. As it straightened the boy - Luskonneg - started to stand up on his tiptoes, head pressing deeper into her shaking chest until it pulled the fabric of her shirt around it, shoulders and knees and calves stiffening.

It wasn't for her any more - it was for the cold and emptiness that would receive all of his stiffness, send goosebumps all over his body. (She could see them now, on his wrists, on the back of his neck. She knew it would be over soon.)

His eyes were closed. His mouth half-open, tongue press-



ing over two large bottom front teeth. His hair sticking up loosely from the static of her shirt.

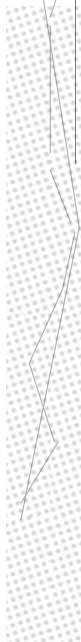
He had stopped moving completely. Not even his nostrils. Not even his diaphragm.

But the gurgles were rising from her throat again, distracting him, interrupting the end of it. The nothing like falling asleep that would let him forget everything that had built up in him.

“Are you...” words spawned out of them. “Are you breathing. Please don’t hold your breath. It’s not good for you, it’s... you’ll get hiccups.”

The tension frequency of the words, grinding his own to a halt, didn’t seem appropriate to hiccups. Surely she knew he couldn’t suffocate himself just by holding his own breath, right? That was the first thing he had looked up, long before they reached this arrangement. Which had been her idea, he wanted to remind her, but he was too deep in to let go just now.

But now he was aware of how he was holding his breath. And some part of him - some enemy - was trying to send daggers of breath into his lungs. And another part of him -





it didn't feel like him any more either - was trying to push them back out.

He doubled over coughing, pulling the string down from her hands with him.

"There... there..." The ineradicable stain of defeat, a hand on his shoulder that he couldn't even resist. The hand wasn't the her he liked being close to in these moments, it was a merciless, faceless envoy of her intention. It was only honest when it was holding the rope. "You don't have to do that. You don't have to hurt yourself."

"Yes I do. I'm going back to the closet."

"No, no." The hand pulled her into the other, the left hand that was only used to hold him, that hung limp even when it moved, numb in its invisible glove, and Luskonneg felt the stiffness, the tiny gap it left instead of closing on him, measured by what fractional millimetres it had increased since last time.

The closet was where it had started. Luskonneg had been hanging his clothes back up, from the right side of his closet to the left, and from the lighter colour to the darker colour. It was his first time doing it on his own and he



had finally decided on a way to do it, even though he had gotten nowhere on answering that for a month and it had been sprung on him first thing after school because mom was tired. He was almost finished. His mother opened the door - "What's taking so long?" - and instantly made an irritated face. "What are you doing? Just run them left to right - don't train your eyes to look at things the wrong way." She started pulling them off and rearranging them.

When she next came up to invite him to dinner, an hour later than usual (because she was tired, of course more so after she'd done the thing she'd been too tired to do anyway), she found Luskonneg in the closet, with one end of a silver-white string he'd had out for a school art project tied around one of the remaining plastic hangers, the other around his neck. It was just chafing on him, he understood nothing about knots or physics (subjects he would go out of his way for years to make himself bad at), but he had pulled himself absolutely taut on his tiptoes as he pulled the other end of the string down with one hand, and didn't move, didn't even acknowledge when she opened the door, tugged the whole thing apart, and watched him go back to it over and over, until not knowing what else to do, she grabbed the end from him, and watched him relax to sleep on her chest.





Luskonneg woke up in a fetal position, in the dark. At first he wasn't even sure he had woken up because he couldn't see anything he usually did in the dark. The dark was a shifting mesh, loops of blue-purple faintness or light shifting in and out of each other, and otherwise utterly featureless. But he had definitely woken up. Because he didn't know what had happened between starting the trip, and this dark.

Just because he had woken up, didn't mean he was awake.

He had had those dreams, where you wake up into another dream before. The dark had gained one feature - the edge of his mattress, which sitting up he could cast his eyes around himself and trace floating in impenetrable grey against the deeper, more fluid tone of the other dark. Like it had been filled in with the edge of a heavy pencil and the rest of his room was a spreading ink-spill.

He let his head sink into his forearms and waited for other objects to appear.

His laptop, for instance. Its screen was open, but dark. A third dark, an onyx mirror.

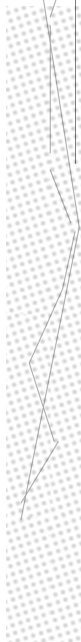


He reached out for the keyboard, thinking first to see what time it was, then to watch an AMV.

It flashed so brilliant, so harsh, and as featureless as the room he immediately squeezed his eyes shut and rolled over to the other side of the pillow.

His own back sheltering him from the floodlight, stretching his shadow out into endless grain, he waited.

Luskonneg sprinted away from the grocery line, knocking over a clip-on shelf and sending packs of gum and small magazines with questionable headlines skittering across the floor. He couldn't have forced himself to glance back and see his mother bending over humiliated. He slammed the bathroom door behind him and crashed his whole body like a plank into the urinal, shoulders just wide enough to lean into the cold of either side, forehead against the top. Normally this gesture of extreme privacy was enough to isolate him in a world in which he had complete control and could pee into the hole of the urinal precisely as a pilot aiming a laser in some kind of target practice, but he was no longer at peace with his body, he couldn't be with his mother scraping fallen magazines off





the floor behind him, and colourless piss exploded from a knot of twisted fly in all directions, splattering his chin but not high enough to satisfy his curiosity as to the taste, he squeezed his eyelids shut for safety and immediately wrung out tears no less sticky with dissolved eye-mucus.

He rubbed the droplets into the weave of his shirt as the contamination ran down his cheeks.

The voice to his left sounded no different from the tears as they bubbled up in hiccuping gouts with his breathing.

It was gurgling wordlessly on and on with barely a pause for breath. The face, a grey-shaven double scoop of chin, was also pressed forehead to wall, concealing as his own before he had made the mistake of looking up.

It breathed through its chin like a fish with gills.

Was this the first time he had seen someone do the exact same thing as him?

Of course, usually if you saw somebody in a weird posture or doing some unintuitive movement, they were just doing magic. And that sound... in school they said nobody really used incantation magic any more because it was in-



efficient. But that was what made the speculation worth it. People on TV did things with incantations all the time that he had never seen anyone do with real magic. It was supposed to be less efficient, but in stories it seemed the opposite, and he was inclined to believe stories.

He believed this more than he believed anything. It scared him sometimes, because he didn't believe anything. He had stayed up all night asking himself that once and the answer was no. One second tried to trick you about the next, and anything on top of that was fooling yourself a thousand times.

In the night, when one second of falling asleep tricked you into still being awake, and staying awake was the cost of vigilance to the seconds trying to trick you, he would occupy himself mumbling strings of random word-like sounds.

The way this guy was talking wasn't quite as word-like as that, but in some way to him that made it sound even more word-like. But it bothered him that he couldn't shape a single syllable.

When he had finished letting the last of his pee dribble onto the urinal cake and went over to the sink, wiping





soap and water up his forearms and on his face and neck too, he kept looking at the corner of the mirror where he could see the man's back, still hunched over the urinal, still gurgling, like there was a drain in his mouth.

He found excuses to spend even longer washing, trying to wash already-dried flecks out of his shirt, then dry his collar. By the time he was at putting his face under the dryer, there was a knock on the door.

It swung open without another knock. "Hey, is there a kid in here? Somebody's kid?"

Luskonneg dove under a stall door before the face entering the room could look in his direction - as it was turned in the other direction, distracted by the urinal guy. He wasn't sure why he was hiding. He would have to explain why he had been so long, and then break it down to every tiny component that went into it and explain that, and find he couldn't explain things that far and start to form weird theories about them and be stuck in that the entire car ride home, with his mom's doubled humiliation dripping between scaffolding of thoughts. Of course, tripling what he had to explain wasn't a winning strategy, either. But he had already discovered it helped him deal with unpleasant things if he deferred them so far that when they happened,



there was no way to support the belief that they could have been otherwise.

The man from the urinal, however, wasn't moving. Hadn't stopped mumbling. The janitor who had walked in pulled a notepad from his capacious pockets and flipped it until he found a page, held it open and added to it with a snub pencil. Then he turned to the door and repositioned an earpiece on the other side of his head. "Manager? That guy's - no, I don't see a kid, but that guy's been in here for two hours twenty minutes now."

Luskonneg had been thinking he might head back to his mom once he wasn't startled by the door opening and someone looking for him - but now he was resolved to stay here until he saw what happened. How the man would be... removed? Would there be a fight?

Would there be a magic fight?

Something Dark?

He had to see it all the way through to the end.

No sooner had silence had congealed in the room than words tore themselves through the continuity, and the





man rasped: "Help... me..."

Luskonneg's ears perked up. He didn't know if he could trust the man - didn't know if he could turn to the Dark, if that was what it was - yet here was someone doing something he thought only he did, against the world.

"Magic... pin... on the... sink."

Luskonneg crept out from under the door, around the painted cinderblock divider (making sure to score a blob of sticky paint with his fingernail) and pressed himself against the rim of the counter, running his arms all over it.

He would not learn until high school health class that this was prescribed to users undergoing a controlled withdrawal from certain controlled substances, resetting their body hard and fast into a normal homeostasis for 24 hours if a withdrawal was stronger than planned.

And spent the rest of the day thinking about it until he recombined every thought so many ways he couldn't make sense of them any more. But he did that about something every other day, by that point, it wasn't something to think about, stay on this, stay on this while you can.



"I don't see... ope." His hand swept too fast because he had given up looking straight at the blindingly wavering detail of the countertop like a cape in front of a bullfighter. The blue-plastic-marble-headed pin skipped the edge of the sink and rolled down the basin.

The urinal guy made no sign of even noticing. Luskonneg fished in the drain and got grey gunk string on his hands.

It occurred to him that the pin might have been some sort of magical power-up. He probably couldn't fight off the store's employees, or the Royal Guard, or the Ecclesia, or the deep cover Dark cultists and shapeshifters, without magical assistance. Maybe there was another way to "help him". Maybe he had come here for this.

As he pressed himself back against the other urinal - the old man was no longer gurgling, he was doing what looked more like forcing himself to cough or hiccup - and began incanting the way he did at night - the old man tore himself out of himself again, both hands gripping the corners of the urinal like a rock jutting out of a sheer cliff, seemingly half likely to tear it out of the wall, leaning over Luskonneg's shoulder. His lips were sucked back into his mouth like it was a wind tunnel and he seemed to move his mouth to speak against the same force that was holding it





open. His pulsing neck seemed to be exerting that force. "What - you doing - making fun of me - tryna get me beat up -"

The door edged open, then swung all the way.

"There's the kid!" the short, balding manager threw one hand back in the employee's face and grabbed Luskonneg away by the scruff of his shirt with the other. "Were you even looking?"

"Where's my pin? I told you to get my pin!" His voice raised proportionately as Luskonneg was dragged out. "The world doesn't work without it! The world doesn't work without it!"

And that was eerily similar to the last thing his father said on the phone to Mom, but he wouldn't learn that until Mom threw that at him in an argument in the sixth grade. And he wouldn't think of that connection until that one disintegrated day of thinking, after which he'd act out bits of his argument with himself as a private form of theatre but never reach a new development in it. That night, however, he found himself not saying anything, and instead trying to make himself stay awake and falling asleep perfectly, a solution so insulting it didn't feel like one. And



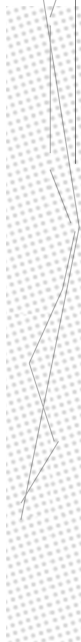
he dreamt of the man hanging around the corner of the schoolyard telling people “he stood like him.”

Luskonneg woke up and let the amber light from between the pixels on his dimmed screen - still in night mode, which he only used for the colour, not to actually sleep - sizzle into his eyes like wax, resolving it into a post from Llau’s private account.

@honeyheart: kicked out of the grocery store for wandering around muttering suicidal thoughts out loud. didn’t even notice. was looking for new fancy dishwashing fluid from infomercial. parents had to get it again. smh

“if only I got to go to the grocery store,” he typed. Then deleted it, because that didn’t obviously seem better. But there was some appeal to grocery stores, wasn’t there? Just looking at all the different things it was possible to eat... the internet of food...

Some sort of deja vu tickled the back of his brainstem. He rolled over to try and think about it and blacked out again.





Where was the hill? How come he had no idea? He knew he had been there several times. He recognized it in the dream, which meant he recognized it in the memory, which meant... But the map of his childhood was so small - almost a floorplan - even he knew it by heart. Then, this must have been a special place because it was “outside” that “map”. But that would also explain why he didn’t know where it was - because as soon as he was outside of his map, he stopped paying attention to his surroundings, at least until he was at his destination, shutting himself in his skull against overstimulation. Trips on the metro were like disappearing into a tunnel of static and popping out somewhere.

Even then, he didn’t even know what part of the city it was in. Or if it was in the city.

He couldn’t see a skyline over the hill. Just a scraggly beard of tree-tips on either side as he came over the crest. He was focused up at his favourite sky. Pure grey-white, light perfectly interpenetrating and balancing with cloud to release all form. Uniform from horizon to horizon, the Earth sealed airtight, but sealed in something more open than the summer skies on the covers of visual novels could ever be, without even the claustrophobic sense of a vault.



But it was late afternoon, because though the sky was the same white-grey it had been all afternoon, would be until the unwatchable sunset was well under way, something about its light was muted. This manifested in the snow itself seeming to glow a light blue, as if under some kind of blacklight. Apart from split shafts of reeds or tall grasses sticking up here and there on either side of him, not a shadow marred this glow. The trees were accented with it too, a reflective lace stitching these two luminous worlds together.

He opened his mouth to call or say something, and decided against it.

He stumbled forward, looking up and down, tilting his head vertiginously, until he was almost standing on top of the footprints. At first, spread out in front of him in a few interlocking loops, they fit the scene, adding notes of a darker blue, like irises blooming from the snow.

But just a couple of cautious steps further and the world was broken. No, rotten, gnawed. The snow looked like the spit-beaded roughage where a bite had been taken out of an apple. Footsteps had trampled footprints until you could see the adhesion patterns in the half-moon imprints of the heels of boots but not where the toe had been, let alone a





trail. Ridges and basins piled up without rhyme or reason, too uneven to pool shadow. In places it had been packed down so low you could see blackened lip hairs of lawn grass. As he looked closer, he realized there were canals on this alien landscape - names.

Off to one side stood a snowman - its arms bent at the closest its makers could find to right angles on either side of its head as if in some religious salutation - its parsnip nose fallen halfway down its chest.

Luskonneg cried - he must have been old enough that he had stopped for a while, because he was surprised, both relieved and betrayed - and transformed the cry into a scream, a sound like tearing the paper sky in two. He ran at the snowman, arms windmilling. A faint, alarmed echo of his name from far behind placed his mother somewhere in the space, hesitant to involve herself. The side of his mitten chopped deep into a shoulder, sending an arm spinning off into space. The other buried itself two-thirds deep into the head on first impact. Would it be possible, he wondered as he rained more blows, to pulverize it so thoroughly it would redistribute the snow evenly across the ground.

But of course, he was just making something uglier.



The light of the sky seemed to be fading as he drove his knee into where he thought the snowman's crotch would have been. It was drying, shrivelling up to grey tissue. He felt like he was doing it, somehow, but also it wouldn't stop if he stopped. He broke off from the jagged cairn he had left and turned towards the names written in the snow - A J and trailing off into something illegible, messy uncials already disconnected by footprints, Frezhenn, Yulwyn. He stomped as his mother's face floated over the crest, itself white from cold and worry and anchoring the dimming light in an all-too-familiar early evening glower.

Luskonneg "woke up" too fuzzy to move. The room was filled with light again but the light was grained with grey no matter how he focused in or out - only the points themselves focused, folding in and out of themselves. He could move, but he couldn't feel anything distinctly enough from anything else - not even the shape of his arm as it dragged space - to know where or how it was moving. His sense of time, however, was completely unaffected - with brutal inexorability, he could count down empty seconds and feel certain he would not lose their rhythm even if it never referenced motion or event again. He didn't try for





very long, but kept updating his estimate as it crawled on to half an hour, forty-five minutes - by far the longest he had been awake since he had taken the combination.

Maybe this meant it was finally kicking in. Maybe he just had to wait.

Maybe this meant he was overdosing. Maybe he would finally die, without even having to figure out what it would take.

Either option was exciting, but having exciting options made waiting agony again.

At about an hour, his hand - which must have been moving, in some sense, the entire time, or long enough that he had felt no change in its motion - crossed the doldrums and washed up on a distinct sensation. It was the glass of the vial, containing the rest of the Ambruxa. The tingles all over his skin began to recede, like a tide, and he thought he could make out distinct shadows on the wall.

Maybe it wasn't kicking in - maybe the trip was already ending.

Reaching another arm over, removing the stopper (when



had he put it back?) felt like hauling against a whirlpool. But he had to - accepting the alternative would feel like violence against himself (and not even the kind that made him feel better), not acceptance - what if this was all there was.

The only other “depressed” kid in his class - as far as he knew, in the school, but he barely knew his own class - was depressed because he couldn’t get a girlfriend. Luskonneg knew he couldn’t get a girlfriend because he was depressed.

The kid - Azzzhhhdd - Axhtdauuu - Ackhh - had the opposite of the problem Luskonneg knew from the forums to be usually the problem with this kind of guy’s jaw. It made the term “lantern jaw” seem fresh and immediate, particularly because it was a lantern that hung on a thin pole, rather than sitting on a column. Hung at a bit of an angle. And his eyes always flashed rapidly off to the side when he started going off about something, swivelling in their slightly popping lids. His short hair swooped off the front of his head and to one side like a chinook. He was weird-looking in a way that was more striking than Luskonneg ever dreamed his would be. And he somehow





genuinely didn't seem to see it.

Luskonneg had cornered him after class by pretending he just accidentally thought they were on the same cleaning duty because he was stupid, which anyone would believe.

- cocked his head into a ray of sunlight. "People come to me all the time because they're 'depressed', they 'know what I'm going through', but I bet they could all get a girlfriend."

Luskonneg half wanted to ask who these other people were, but the fact that he didn't know meant the kid was probably right about them, whether or not the problem was that they could get a girlfriend.

"I mean, do you really think I could get a girlfriend."

"But why would having a girlfriend make you not depressed? What part of it?"

If you were the kind of depressed where you couldn't imagine things worse maybe this wouldn't hit the same.

"Are you gay and that's why you don't get it?" The kid talked out of the side of his mouth, the other side as if compensating for the crookedness of his head, and rolled his



eyes and despite that was still looking at him. "Or asexual?"

It occurred to Luskonneg - maybe he wouldn't mind being with someone if it could be like this, if they could keep looking down on him and still be with him.

"No. I play straight dating sims." He played them for the bad ends and when he did get around to the main routes he'd stop after all the major plot points had been resolved and all that was left to do was gesture around the couple's dawning life together, which when he tried to insert himself into would make him so scared he couldn't think straight. The last few times he had noticed the fear congealing into sadness.

"Huh. You should get it then. It's like a game and you're not allowed to get to the end."

"But it's not. They literally talked about that in health class." They had played a dating sim the Ecclesia had developed to teach healthy norms about dating and consent, in which the characters broke the fourth wall multiple times to explain where real humans would be more complicated and how, which seemed to defeat the purpose to Luskonneg, because if real humans were so complicated





what did any of the rules the game was trying to teach have to do with them. The game controlled for this by randomizing some of the character reactions and Luskonneg got impossible strings of reactions the entire time he played it, as if the computer was taunting his doubts, which wasn't supposed to happen but made perfect sense to him. "It's not the end."

"They're not gonna tell you this, but they have a relationship simulator you play in two years in high school. And I won't even have passed the dating one."

"So you just... want to play the other game? And it doesn't bother you that you're still just playing? That's stupid, you might as well be depressed because Arcology 3 isn't coming out..." wait. He should have picked a game he wasn't actually sad about the sequel not coming out to. He turned away as the lump in his throat pumped the tears to his eyes.

"Wow, you're not depressed at all, you sound like a counsellor or something. Do you think telling me shit like that is gonna help me?"

"No!" He spun around and yelped and the tears in his eyes looked like they weren't even about Arcology 3. - visi-



bly recoiled in surprise and that surprise - that was something, too. "I mean it won't help you, and it doesn't help me either." What's different about a friend, he wanted to ask, because he didn't think he could have that either. But he had the energy to get out maybe one of five things at a time he wanted to say against the resistance. Having a friend, having a girlfriend, would mean selecting like that for hours every day - how.

"Then why don't you kill yourself. I would if I couldn't still maybe get a girlfriend."

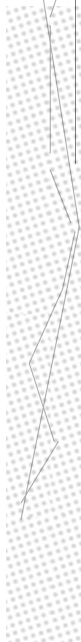
"Something... stops me. The same thing that stops me from doing other things." How are you depressed if you don't know that, he wanted to say, but if he did he felt like wouldn't get to keep looking at those eyes moving.

"So you're saying, there's no way to prove or disprove anything you're saying."

"There's no way for you to prove or disprove it either."

"You can prove it," - spat. "Bend over for me. And see if you're still depressed after that."

Luskonneg burst out laughing genuinely, like a tiny sun





had just melted and broken through glass. He then immediately started gasping, because each failed breath was unteaching himself how to breathe. "How would that prove that? You're not a girl, and you'd be the not depressed one."

"No, you're not a girl so it won't fix me, but you're definitely gay or something so it might fix you."

- was genuinely startled when he swung his lantern jaw back around and the weirdo had actually done it (he managed to yell STOP before the underwear).

Luskonneg's world was suddenly flashing blue and purple and orange static, terrible discharges from endless above to endless below.

His face was on its side on the desk, steaming like a meat bun.

He wanted to make sure it still looked happy.

He wondered if something bad was going to happen to him and then he remembered he was doing a million times worse in his head to everyone he looked at every day. He was at the black hole centre of an inverted sunburst of



solid gold pillars, slamming into him endlessly with dull clangour from every angle.

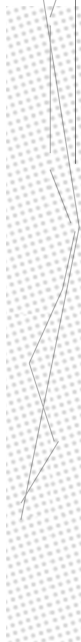
Luskonneg had already humiliated himself, and saw no need to move. If he tried to move something like that might happen again.

“Are you... drooling?”

Maybe he was. Did it look like happy drool?

He felt cautious fingers on his hips - the cloth now hanging loose around his hips pulling - he felt a hard point of alien cloth pressing his underwear between his legs. A black crystal was doubling its size and number of points and facets from inside his diaphragm twenty times a second. He had miscalculated himself. The line between imagination and reality was about to be dissolved and every horrible thing he had ever imagined would spill out like the guts of a whale. “Stop! I don’t... I don’t wanna have nothing in common with you any more,”

The pressure immediately vanished. “In that case you already have nothing in common with me.” The clip of his fresh white rubber soles (he’d been given a brand new pair after standing in a mud puddle to impress a bunch





of girls who laughed at him for it. Luskonneg stared at them between the chair legs in class) on the floor vibrated through the desk to his ear. "And you also just proved I can't... even with a guy. Can't believe I almost did that. Don't talk to me again."

TheLogicKingFTW, who Luskonneg considered his only friend - if you had posted 5000 times in someone's server, you had talked to them more than most of his classmates talked to each other - would say this was a perfectly normal thing for any human to do in a free exchange of interests and anyone who felt bad about it was probably a latent narcissist. Luskonneg was a latent narcissist. He was still trying to invent scenarios that could salvage them kissing or something.

And what would he do then. They would probably end up cannibalizing each other.

But letting this end was already so bad he couldn't compare it to things any more.

It was so bad, it might force him to stop things being bad, and that was the last thing he wanted.

He felt something like an endless army marching up



through him. Waiting for him to point it at the source of his pain.

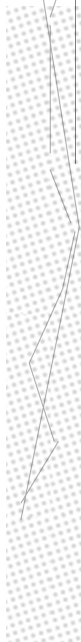
What was the source of his pain. Waves of ice static were rolling over his skin and the sharp reflections on the corners of desks surrounded by waves of evening reddishness were sparks lighting them on fire.

"I guess you're right!" He planted his hands on the table and pushed himself up. "I have nothing in common with you! You're not depressed and you can get it any time you want!"

As soon as the words were out the contents of his stomach followed.

The door that had just creaked open slammed shut again. "Oh fuck. Fuck this. They warned me about you. I should have just got out of the room."

The boy's hands pulled his belt back around his waist. The heel of one hand slapped his back several times as if any more contact would bring infection. Except then another hand, or the same one, was sliding under his armpit, between his briny yellow shirt-seam and already mostly discarded jacket. "Goddess fuck. Don't tell the nurse any-





thing when you get there, and pay me \$50 for having to stay late and clean up after you, I might even consider being your friend or whatever. That's basically just standing around and listening to you talk about dating sims or something, right?"

That army was already here. Its soldiers stood at attention behind his eyes. They swung his head like a drawbridge. Ready to protect all the fragile bad things he was made of - all the writhing worms just begging to be crushed. When - saw those pupils he saw the weaponized incomprehension of black ants. "Why. I won't have anything in common with you."

"We're obviously both still miserable about something."

That was true, and Luskonneg's heart was still spasming like a bird trying to get off the ground with a broken wing.

"And you still haven't killed yourself about it yet."

- grabbed Luskonneg's head with both hands, tilting it into something like the same angle it always sat at, to look him straight in the eyes. "Do you really wanna go back to that. While I'm holding up all your useless weight, you can't even move, and there's a window open."



Black flame ate his memory.

A teacher found him passed out in the room. According to the records, - transferred to another school. No one ever mentioned him again.

The last time Luskonneg woke up it was evening again and all the fuzziness had moved to his throat and mixed with driness to become a sort of awful clay, and he had to eat, and he had made sure to have some burgers stored in the fridge beforehand, and it was over.

He didn't "publish his results", as it were, for almost a full work week (lol). He kept dredging the grey sludge of his experience over and over for some hint of anything he might have dreamed or felt during the hours he'd been unconscious, or waiting for some wave of afterglow to at least justify the experiment with wistfulness. He saw a plane cross the corner of his window once and thought of the animated visual language for the way even a hopeless love could feel like catching sight of something beautiful in passing by, and of course in thinking of it he didn't feel it. When the sentences of the "report" he kept spontaneously turning over in his head were sufficiently scath-





ing he cut his losses on finalizing it that way, both on the Drugs board and in an epic thirty-post Feed thread. He got positive notes on Feed from people who seemed to think he was making the whole thing up to go with his “cynical” brand.

It was official now. He wanted to die, more regularly and more seriously than he had in a long time.

He wanted to die so badly that if he didn't he might start wanting to live.

Braz woke up with her large frame awkwardly enveloping a small plastic folding chair, unable to stand up without lifting it from the ground.

If that was supposed to actually prevent her from standing up, whoever had put her here had underestimated her physical coordination. Hands and upper legs alike ziptied to the chair, she levered herself carefully up and down until she found the optimal crouching angle in which to remain upright with her feet on the ground and move with the chair jutting helplessly out behind her. She estimated she could fight off one or two men with standard recruit's



training like this. She walked forward in utter darkness and silence - probably a sensory quarantine spell, but not a sophisticated one. The floor's echoes rang with a particular shape she recognized as the marble of the sacred quarry The'lleth used in high-grade Ecclesiastical buildings.

She kept walking for what her internal clock approximated to five minutes without hitting a wall, and turned left. Same, extending her estimate to ten. She turned back in the other direction, doubling again, estimating the scale of the space. Infinite spaces had been made with magic by high-level clerics of the Dark Lord in certain legends and crank mages in unreplicable papers but she had heard of these broad flat catacombs under certain Ecclesiastical complexes, their use as psychological torture, and the height of the ceiling - almost scraping the top of her head even bent over to carry the chair, dripping something sticky and cold, seemed to confirm what she knew.

She knew what was supposed to happen next in this interrogation method. She hadn't been trained to resist it - Dark cultists didn't have the resources for it, and there was nobody who did you were supposed to resist interrogation by - but she had trained herself as an exercise,





because Shaïgnar did that and if he ever went rogue, she supposed, she would have to be able to do what he did, but it also just gave them things to do.

She wandered around, attempted magic and different systematic movements, acted out stages of panic and despair. When she finally hit one of the walls - and grasped, by extension, the space of at least fifty hectares of homogenous emptiness she was enclosed in - she collapsed and started to cry - to her own surprise, genuinely, not that they would have been able to tell.

The voice came from everywhere (she had guessed from the beginning the scale of the space simply from the limits of the spell that would allow it to act as a transmitter/receiver, assuming the Ecclesia used the same units of preservers as her section, and was also keeping their interrogators in a totally separate building). It sounded like an average of every voice she had ever heard. The masking was a matter of procedure too, but at the level she and anyone doing this to her had to be operating, it was a near-certainty that if it hadn't been masked she would have recognized it.

“Commissioner Braz, you are being held under existential threat authority but there are no charges against you. If



you answer our questions satisfactorily you may be released with no memory of this interrogation. First: name the Ecclesiastical asset who made contact with the Dark Lord on the eleventh day of the third month.”

...what. Why the hell would they think she would know that? The Ecclesia wasn't even supposed to know the identities of their own assets. Everyone close enough to the Dark Lord to figure into the [Taboo Preserver]'s reports was given a code designation and an open dossier with a set of basic context to parse their function in the reports. Anyone significant enough to become an asset was given a siloed team of handlers. During the Dark Lord's childhood, Braz's predecessor, Commissioner Iaid (Shaïgnar she respected, albeit probably in a different way than everyone else did; Iaid she admired) had supervised dozens of such teams; thanks to his success, by Braz's time, the number of active assets under Elthazan's authority had dwindled to six. (The last thing she remembered before this, in fact, she'd been finalizing instructions for a new team to handle that reply guy the Dark Lord had almost met up with.) She'd joked about the [Taboo Commissioner] but in a way, it was Ymaññ who really commissioned them, transmitting his knowledge of the assets' identities to an amulet for each member. When the members



wore the amulets, they knew the identities of their targets; when they took them off, they didn't. The amulets were bonded to their wearers by the [Taboo Preserver]'s spell so that if anyone else wore them, the information would be hopelessly scrambled. The Commissioner only managed the teams; she didn't have any amulets herself, although she did know a fair bit about the assets from her teams' reports.

The Ecclesia's asset wasn't even an asset in this sense. In their longstanding battle against the Dark cults that they considered to supersede secular efforts, they maintained a net of sleeper assets throughout the entire population, with no regular duties but awaiting any arbitrary mission. The current Colonel Inquisitor had considerably stepped up this program. If one of those assets encountered the Dark Lord, the [Taboo Preserver] was required to report it, and they flipped into another kind of asset entirely - one with special information from the [Taboo Preserver], managed by the same kind of siloed team. This was supposed to memory wipe everyone except the team that the person had ever been an asset. However, the current Colonel Inquisitor had also quietly revoked this policy, giving the Ecclesia privileged information on where and who the Dark Lord was.

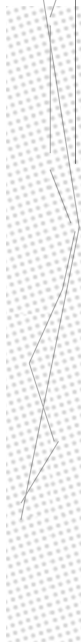


"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" she spat, bleakly confident that it wouldn't matter once she figured out how to give a serious answer. "You benefitted from the recent containment breaches. Do you think I've been spying on your assets? Did you lose them and think it's my fault somehow?"

"You would benefit from the entire series of breaches if you can answer this question. I understand you think you have no reason to incriminate yourself to us. As unlikely as it sounds, that option will genuinely be better for you than the alternative."

Wait. She remembered the notes. This latest encounter was a journalist.

Anything a journalist wrote in Winter City would go through Elthazan censorship. Braz had a station on the censorship chain to prevent their activities from getting out into the press. Whenever she got a story out to that censorship chain, they would probably be able to piece together from details who the Dark Lord was. Braz hadn't even been considering doing anything with the information - she had expected to dutifully erase the memory as soon as it crossed her desk.





She didn't really want to have to think about Ymañ's tor-mentor as a person with a name and a face and an address, a certain combination of streetcars away from her at all times.

But if that was what they wanted they should have waited. None of the latest reports suggested the article was getting written any time soon, or in her opinion, would ever get written. Did they think she knew through the journalist registry some other way?

It had to be a trainee from Yn Dahh't, but...

Wait, how many Yn Dahh't trainees would be there be in Winter City? They usually went somewhere there was a crime beat, not cozy tourist traps with a culture sector.

"I might have been able to figure that out if you'd let me at all my files instead of doing whatever this is. You can't be that confident that I didn't just luck into this, can you?"

"The existence of the journalist is not the reason we believe you didn't."

Now she was really starting to panic. What the hell was going on?



"Can I attempt to address these reasons if you tell me them. I can't think of anything that doesn't feel insane to invoke under existential threat." And they couldn't do that unilaterally... suddenly, she imagined it was Shaïgnar's voice under all the masking.

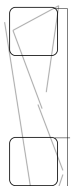
They stopped and let her languish for half an hour. Then, apparently satisfied she really didn't have an answer to the first question, asked the second.

"What is the spell you have been Preserving for your last three Confessions."

"Huh? There's my wards, but those are all standard...." If Shaïgnar had put her under some non-approved ward... but then the Confessors definitely wouldn't be able to tell.

"Is it possible..." she hated saying this, because it wasn't. It shouldn't be. "That I am not aware of this spell." And it hit her - if she wasn't, then the existential threat precautions made all the more sense. If say, the spell was supposed to trigger somehow when the journalist gave her the information - what spell? - if she were somehow being used to obtain the Dark Lord's identity for someone...

That option will genuinely be better for you than the alterna-





tive.

Ymaññ.

Maybe this was punishment somehow.

She thought back to her conversation at Contour. She still didn't consider it a failure of piety that she didn't think of the Goddess intervening in those kinds of ways on an everyday basis. As far as she was concerned, that the Goddess was perfect, self-aware, self-consistent Order was demonstrated best in the indifferent universality of Her laws. That she could use the ironclad law of causality, that nothing would happen if she didn't do anything, or say anything, or even put a thought into words to contain... because the words were part of the consistency of the world and the feelings didn't have to be - this now struck her as potentially an inconsistency in itself. And the Goddess corrected inconsistency, the Scriptures said, with inconsistency if necessary.

The voice had vanished again. She lay on her side, and imagined the drapery of [Taboo Preserver]'s enclosure falling around her, so opposite in texture but somehow like the heavy, rough traditional C'harnian curtains of dark grey goatswool yarn threaded with gold fibre that surrounded



her childhood bed and made the world outside seem more wide and cold and exciting when they shifted at her touch and she felt a draft from the crack-open window.

She tensed, let go a shuddering sigh, and mechanically stretching her body out in release the chair cracked.

“Holy shit it’s” the voice echoed distantly, as if from the other side of a room, into the space and abruptly cut.

She tried various lines of clarification - and racked her brain for possible spells she could be Preserving, or bits of info that might narrow down the journalist - but the voice never replied after that.

The basic requirements of ordinary magic - the kind practiced by clerics and mages, as opposed to rhi cultivation or the wild magic of animals - were an Executor and a Preserver. These could be the same person, although recursion made a spell less stable - in the scenario where she knew what the hell was going on, she would probably be both. The Executor defined the spell as a relation between an action and an effect. The Preserver only had to repeat the action as long as the effect was to be maintained, unless it was a one-shot. Much of the modern workforce was employed as Preservers for standardized spells they





had no conceptual understanding of, operating assembly lines or power grids or the internet. A Preserver technically didn't even have to be aware of the spell they were Preserving, although such unwitting magic was rare; both because it was conventionally (as opposed to theoretically) Dark (military and Ecclesiastical agents of Braz's rank were allowed to use it in keeping with approved mission objectives), and because the standard Executor-Preserver Contract that was the foundation of modern magic avoided the finicky recursion of an Executor having to define, Execute and Preserve a spell designating a Preserver.

In orthodox doctrine, the invocation of a spell by its Executor was a kind of prayer. Execution and Preservation both mobilized rhi, and magic users had their own rhi cultivation exercises which helped build the power to accomplish more difficult spells, in terms of complexity of parameters or scale of effect. But fundamentally if a spell succeeded it was because it had been sanctioned by the Goddess as compatible with the ultimate Order of the universe, a momentary law of physics for its defined parameters that would not leak out of them and conflict with the others. Which posed a problem for understanding Dark magic. The prevailing theory was that Dark magic was a sort of free riding, in the same sense as human evil but at a higher



level of abstraction; the consistency of subtle, undiscovered congruence principles of successful spell definition demanded that certain magical forms and actions be possible despite contradicting the ultimate teleological goal of magic, and the righteous action of pious magic users was the feedback correcting this inconsistency.

She had good wards on her, so for her to be Preserving any spell against her will would mean her wards would have to have been circumvented, which would take an exceptional magic user and very close quarters. She didn't go out much; her workplace was full of good magic users, but not on that level and under exceptional security. Most of the ones who could do it were with the Ecclesia; and it occurred to her that the simplest explanation might be that this was a setup, coupling her from the Containment Board right when the Dark Lord was about to fall into their asset's hands.

Dark penetration of the Ecclesia was the stuff of stupid conspiracy theories, message board heretics the likes of which the Ecclesia themselves didn't bother to go after any more because they discredited themselves so easily. She didn't like the Colonel-Inquisitor, but this seemed a bit ridiculous of a length to go to over organizational poli-





tics. Did the Ecclesia have some plan to deal with the Dark Lord in a way they didn't think would be approved - a return to frontal attack? How deep would that go?

Eventually she snapped the remaining halves of the chair, which basically gave her free movement of her arms and legs, not that the restraint was more than a formality at this point. The door, wherever it was, according to procedure, had been magically sealed, and there wasn't enough in the space to improvise a counterspell. It was possible to use the body as a substrate for magic, especially unusual and repetitive actions, but likelihood of overlap both limited the effects and decreased the rate of success of body magic; you were better off manipulating the body's rhi field directly.

She was even wearing a standard grey captive's jumpsuit, without any of the complexities of her military uniform (the uniformity of which was itself normally too much of an overlap factor, but a space this featureless did have the self-defeating effect of making spell definitions stronger). She stood up, breathed in and out, started circulating rhi - at this point no longer worried about looking helpless, not sure they were even monitoring her any more - and took inventory of her senses, waiting to notice any minor envi-

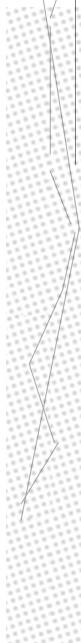
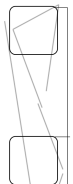


ronmental regularity her captors might have overlooked.

Wait - if they had taken all her normal clothes and accessories, why wasn't her hair piling up on her shoulders?

She had gotten so used to having it up she hadn't even noticed. She reached behind her head and took hold of - it wasn't cold and pitted like the traditional bronze of her usual barrette - it had sharp bumps and felt almost papery, fragile - she adjusted her grip strength, resisted a momentary counter-pinch, and, eyes narrowing in bewilderment, removed a six-inch stick bug from back of her head. An oily sheaf of relinquished hair swung against her neck.

"I was just about to make my appearance known." A voice that sounded even more anonymous than the masked interrogator - like an automated answering system on a phone line - issued from the insect cradled in her palm, which she could now see as a ball of blue-purple light hazily illuminated everything in a small radius around it, including herself and the door-outline in the wall. "Your rivals are currently occupied with your own function. Praise the Goddess for the ironies with which she corrects us. This travesty of justice will come to an end and my master will punish their recklessness and arrogance by both official and unofficial channels."





"Your Master?" The next word came out as a sigh of brain-melting relief swaddled in exasperation. "Shaïgnar?"

So he did have secret familiars. Of course he did.

"Let go and step back."

She did. The stick bug opened the casing of its thorax and spread its wings. It shook them in a strange pattern, starting and stopping and vibrating almost in place where they stopped. If she had seen it on a branch she would have assumed some sort of mating dance. If she had watched it in slow motion and zoomed in, she would have been reminded of letters in a flag code.

The air around them roared like a vacuum. Braz's newly loose hair pulled itself over her head and past her ears, a seaweed tunnel filtering her world. Her collar floated around her neck, and pulled on one side then another as the air-flow reversed. The crack in the wall beginning to narrow and shake, emitting a high-pitched whine. As she started to feel like she was being pulled back into the dark of the interrogation catacomb (her own version of the [Taboo Preserver]'s chambers, and the Dark Lord's apartment, wouldn't that be consistent? wouldn't that be right?)



It popped out and inward, far enough the bug itself had to jump back onto her settling pants leg as the top edge of the featureless door-slab cracked against the floor just inches in front of her bare feet.

Nobody knew how animals could do things like that, or why they almost never did in the course of their ordinary lives.

She hoped this one was well-trained enough to know the implications of its doing things like that. This would just have a whole Ecclesiastical complex down on them, wouldn't it?

But it turned out, the interrogation site was as compartmentalized as the interrogator themselves. A lightly ascending tunnel half a kilometre long opened into a warehouse full of magical substrates tucked away behind the meditational grounds on the Ecclesiastical Territory outside Winter City, an artificial lake and stream tucked between two terraced earthworks pyramids overgrown with natural local forest. They borrowed a parked groundskeeper's buggy, the stick bug transforming effortlessly into a key. It was one of those weird close moons you miss because they're in the early morning, although it was still a dreary, river-ice white-grey even at its size like a huge





boulder slipping down from one terrace to another, the steps crosshatched with bare broken branches.

Shaïgnar met her at the gates. His three recognizable familiars stood by in half-hidden, but deliberately half-visible positions throughout the woods around - enough to disable whatever security would be operating at this hour if her specific captors were occupied.

"I'm sorry. I did have to sign off existential threat precaution on you, but I didn't think this is what they would do with it. I'll get this sorted out, and I don't mean in your favour if it turns out you are screwing us somehow. Put this on." He held out a little paper talisman, two strips braided several times at the top with flame- and wave-style scroll calligraphy inked down a central line. "And start writing down when it moves."





2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
MPECEN02
GILNEBV0
COMWODO
B1202
EVBV100
PILVICE2
23E
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1B20W
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VGI000
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D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
M101
IWCIDID0
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E102W0D
2ED DO
WE EGI1
V01B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0WEL
211
D0G0V
1B20W
T0B0W



Name: Harka

Birthday: Unrecorded, presumably summer 2643

Sex: Blue

Occupation: Errant

Blood type: 14-X

Likes: Drinking, songs about drinking, rice, neat vests, the smell of laundry, landscape painting and exploration, keeping secrets, coffee, salmon, funerary rites, sunlight, and all animals

Dislikes:: Stagnation and complacency, sitting still whatsoever, being misled or condescended to, strict personalities, Savannah staff, storms, display season, nymph language

Seen with: Kali's inner circle, the crew of Umihotaru, contacts from Quarry



Something of a handyman, something of an ambassador, Harka is among the king's oldest and closest friends, and works as a very independent right hand. One of Quay's strongest fliers and brightest blues, since nymphhood e has guarded and supported the king, making up for Kali's disability. Not quite as



sharp, but makes up for it in loyalty and passion. In recent years, has spent much of his time at the distant end of Savannah, Quarry's End, living with and studying the craft of Quay's main and only friendly rival. Not a scholar, but a very good listener. Curious and good-humored, very patient until he has a reason not to be, and then swings to being easily frustrated and provoked. A true believer in the ideals of Quay; education, ambition, organization, expansion, and a simple but whole way of life. Has very conflicted feelings about Triactian culture, as well as a very incomplete view of it, but holds its tenets of personal biological self-determination as a very high virtue.



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.



2
LVCIP121
AET
TVCN2
VCCN224
WPECEN02
LAEVBU
20MODO
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EVAIDU
ATLBICE2
23E
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D000E
E1
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1WCID10
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WE E11'
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Last Time

entering savannah, emerly's team is shown the grounds and the final, hidden party in their negotiations: the tengmu, whose childlike vision could bring conflict to the long-harmonious species of humanity



CW: religion, afterlife, altered states of consciousness, human psychological experimentation, cults, animal cruelty, mental breakdown, consciousness sharing, hunting, butchery, meat eating, skeleton

FROM THE EUGENETICS CHANTICLEER

OF THE ECUMENE OF HEATH

Year 320 of the Eighth Sun

As mandated by the New Epcot Charter and modern pan-diocesan human rights law, this chancicleer recognizes and resolves that a new, and fourth, speciation is necessary.

While the Delphic and Novarian proposals for the approaching Hundred-Year Plan are admirable and well considered, neither people are adapted to the task. While the

RECORD V



question of wheel colonization could be resolved in any number of ways - increased investment in janitorial and automative infrastructure, or simple unadapted inhabitation - these current proposals are insufficient in poetic quality for the era itself.

Human technology is amenable to the task. But of the three human species, none are. Under any of our directions, the wheel would neither be a region nor a home, but rather a resource as in the failure of the Aerean proposals. But the nature of the wheel is such that it requires a people, and a name, for the mode of life its natural law demands will inevitably be reached by humans as the Ecumene reaches maturity. Under the current proposals, the wheel would turn one of two directions - one, an imperial expansion of an existing culture, or two, a slow and natural speciation not under the control of the Ecumene.

Therefore this chancicleer, alongside the three Heathling Sees, the Novarian Operational Court, and Ia-Om, hereby lay down these guidelines for the creation of a new people. These guidelines are intended to be as minimal as possible to reduce alienation from baseline and rigidity of design.

Two main principles;



- Full systemic adaptation to microgravity
- Modified parietal and pineal areas for three-dimensional navigation in unweight
- Prehensile feet to aid orientation and movement in indoor environments
- Extrapolated vestibular system for similar purposes
- Continually self-repairing skeleton and musculature
- Thriving in a land of inherent scarcity
- Diminutive size and slowed metabolism at maturity to decrease resource consumption
- Heavily reduced sexual dimorphism and a return to unmodified standards of gender
- Lack of claustrophobia reflex for living-space efficiency

The true name of this people must be found in their own history, and technical name in the process of design. But



as placeholder, and in the tradition of Declarations “Sidhe” (homo aristes) and “Qajin” (homo innubilius), this chanticleer has elected to use the word “Knytt”: after all small, strange, and beloved humanoid creatures in our shared folklore.

Eugenetics Declaration “Knytt”

Record V

towards the grave tree

I blinked. She did not. Ice, ice in the air, like the frost on an aging void-facing window. But just as our eyes had held each other long enough that I was near fidgeting again, she let out a grand terse sigh that I could only describe as childish, looked away from me, and began.

“When you first saw footage of heaven,” Tacimarsa asked, against the glass of the Plains Room, “what did you see? The very first tries. Before you were used to it.”



“Why is it the beginning that concerns you? Superplanal dynamics are not unfamiliar to me, but it is years of study before the sight is made useful.”

“Yes. As a priest you’re used to grappling with its nature. But there are no preconceptions at the start. Please consider and tell me.”

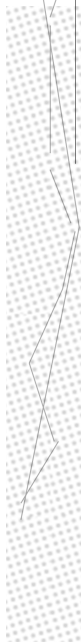
When was it? Long before the lieutenant’s course, long before I had any language for the practicality of such a thing. It must have been very early on in school, the first theology classes you take in compulsory education. Whatever it had been, it wasn’t as if it made an exceptional impression. Some people saw the faces of their loved ones, living and dead, changed by flourish. Some saw transcendent insight they struggled to even transcribe. That first glimpse could define lives, and had been doing so since the first broachings had been made, but it had never taken that effect on me. Once you made sense of your perspective, all the mystery fell away in favor of a blunt, warm certainty that by nature did not require second looks.

I hadn’t quite appreciated this chamber, when it had been full. The crowd of bodies at the brunch had made the place loud and hot, obscured the form of how the three glass walls down its length met at managed angles, the



seams between them, the volume of uniform yellow grass that danced behind each. There the dias was empty, and all the perches unheld. Something in the grasses' motion felt like being underwater. How perfect they were, how equal in length, how drawn in the cool ventilation breeze.

The innermost layers of Savannah all felt like this. Out from the generic, canopy-mimicking chic of the empty alabaster storefronts around the docks regions, those repeated and repeated templates of too-wide living space woven between the vast, closed-off gulfs of infrastructure. Only gradually, and deeply, did those manicured gardens gave way to showcases like this. Not individual, tasteful displays of complemented vegetation, but portraits of specific ideas of the interior design. This made ever more sense since the visit down. This, the Plains Room, was clearly a purified vision of Savanni plains, the yellow painter's streaks of little-broken grasses that covered so much of that inner sky-land we had seen above. A signifier encased in perfect glass geometry. Now that I had had a chance to explore beyond even these most sealed doors, the whole region was like this. Corridors of circular glass, with muddy turquoise waters and muddy red fish helplessly circling in the current. Glass conference rooms, whose walls showcased bonsai-wide trees grown in straight and even-





ly-spaced lines, but with branches free and unkempt. An archive of concepts.

And that did serve to jog my memory, those grasses swaying like hair. Here I was, having asked only one question; tell me, consultant, of any Weylbloom connection I should be aware of, and she had already swung the interview around onto me. I humored her.

“Oh, I recall. It was something simple. Visions of rain and snow, or indistinct animal shapes... things that confused me, for I was young, and had only been exposed to those things in books or songs or distant feeds. I suppose my link was trying to reconnect me with a few snippets of ancestral memory.”

“Hm.” Her legs stiffened from where they were anchored to the perch by her clipper-shoes. “I see so in your affinities. Well, I say it, because I didn’t see footage until I started traveling for work. And the first times was just nothing. Interplanar static. Single words, fragments of thought. Maybe my heart just wasn’t weighted that way, maybe I wasn’t going there, I thought. But I looked, to answer your question. Tried to pull down those words. Who knows, but it disturbed me.



“By the time I was called to Weylbloom I had almost given up on heaven mattering for us. Of it being any more useful than other ways to alter ones own state. The grand archive, dream of all dreaming, never to be translated to satisfaction. A thing that barred its gates. I was young then, too, and given to these kinds of hopes. Soon, the static I saw, after years, changed to golden fire. An accurate view. And that is when they got me.”

“The founders of Weylbloom?”

She perched stone-still from across me, eyes fixed on mine, statuesque as she ever was. Long, spear-straight hair, a decorated upper-staff uniform that sat on her frame like a weapon. Most Triactians, upon earning their syllables, delved further and further into ostentatious modification, it was the basis of the changeling self - but for her she remained plain and close to baseline. Had she only carved her preexisting features in, harder and harder at each step? She made an impression, ice cube in a sea of golden fog, and there was not one trace of doubt in that expression.

She spoke so quickly, “Yes, obviously it was a cult, obviously you know how cults work, how they drag you in. The armor cracks they can smell. It begins with a lie about the shape of the world, and I was primed to believe it.



Come and see, they said, come and build this library, of the richest minds and hearts, that we could keep with them past their time. It was the fearful kind of immortality, a blindness, couched in all the cosmopolitan aspirations of the inner wheel. We built the library, the hall of sages, fat university prize-winners. And then their souls reached the end of their watchmaker's span, and burnt, and burnt. Even in the worst of the project heads, who was expecting this? Who wanted it? Death - time - changes the shape of a soul, and without being unmoored from the tellurian plane... well. Eccentricity and insight, at first. But in ten years each was an atrocity." Her throat twitched. "Do you know the kind of thing I had to cover up, in those days? When the ghost-riots began gripping that thousand-per-son habitat. Cats nailed living to the walls in hundreds, on a tuesday. We began with talk of heaven living in this world."

"You speak very harshly. Even the portions of the hearing I have access to... I suppose refraining from the true grotesqueries is a good thing."

"Yes, well, don't we lose sight of it?" She sighed, high, patient-impatient, dramatic. "Don't we love to bury histories. But I was there, yes, in the thick of it, and you've been



right to look at me like that. But I won't run. Here we are. I've spent every year since trying to heal, myself and the parts of the world it touched. To undo the legacy. Not for the injustice, priest - who cares - but for the enshrined pride."

I realized I had not blinked in several minutes, and quickly willed some traces of tears to compensate. Immediately she softened.

"Help me understand," I shook my head. "When I spoke to Dr. Savelyevna, she spoke of this as a retirement. Set Pearl Wall, an exile to laurels. Is it the same for you? Are you here, now, to garden? Is that your healing?"

She smiled. "A good word. I came out of Weylbloom at home in death. Greeting it as a friend. A lesson I should have learned, long ago, from Cote when he was Coteshi. But that's not why I came to Savannah. This land is a pure one, lieutenant. I am glad you saw the interior, the red earth, the blue glow, it is good to see. I suppose I'm here as a purification rite. This empty but blooming land, the false sun you're so scared of. A land of life and something like a horizon. No more projects of blood and lineage and hope. There is an innocence in all Triactionian ambition. But here it is true, and not vile naivete."



I had put the inner circle off for so long, deferring to their stays and delays happily, for how could I face them without crumpling? And that was before we knew the weight of lives - that no longer were the victims of this place, as we had supposed, the cult members themselves. That it was not with themselves that their work was. And that was before the tide of realization had come in. They had made a grand show, paperwork, forms, screeds for our poor Herarl, an unimpeachable dodge. I had been grateful for it - time to become ready, to be able to face them, grapple with their stature and their secrets.

“Your courts did their work,” she continued simply, her smile continuing to flicker slightly, slightly stronger, “and I’ve no ambition or conflicts left. No weight. No fear. Just the things I once loved in my homeland, honored here in the still-still plains. Ancestral memory. Soon, the phases will progress. Soon this will be a place of healthy society. And soon I will be dead, and at home in that old golden flame at last.”

What possible explanation could there be, for her not to know? There still was not a trace of doubt in her. Still she was steady, forward and brave. Was there any possible way did she not know? Was there any possible way her story



was true, that this is what she felt?

“When did you and Coteshinoeleon become acquainted? You speak of him familiarly.”

“Oh!” she said sharply, eyes unoffended and wide, “Oh, I had assumed it was known... he’s always just been my teacher, you see. In correspondence. Career-spanning. Savannah was once the project of his own teacher, and after her death he had meant to honor it. Hence those garish fucking statues, haha. So I followed him here, and had a place.”

“I see. Ehe, I had wondered, your hometown was the same...”

And now she was beaming, relaxed, entirely warm and fluid. “Apologies for my passion, lieutenant. And apologies for my reticence. But that was all I wished to say. And I wanted time to be sure that your crew did not come with knives.”

“Consultant! Please!”

“Figuratively! An agenda. I understand it, the worry. But you’ve been asking your worst questions straight and





frank. You'll get all the time and assurance you need from us. I do trust you, now."

And it was clear, in the mood of that room, that there was nothing left to say.



"And that's what they're used for. It's a very complex mechanism, but the refraction networks let light that reaches the interior be granularly scaled between the luminaire spintelight and actual sunlight mirrored in from, well, right here! A similar system also pipes light and light fixtures through the sections of the cap - we can see those diagrams another day, yes? So by default it's a seasonal system. Right below us, where you visited, at this point in the calendar, should have been at about 20% true sunlight, and likewise at the opposite end. The middle of the habitat is at 80% sun now, for example, and it rotates down the length once a year." Beckon flipped the slide - more blueprints on the wall, this time a detailed calendar view, split out between twenty segments of the interior. I rubbed my eyes. "Eventually, as parcels get leased out, it can be customized by area. It's all about catering! But... at your limit for today, lieutenant?"



"Ahh, you've caught me. I apologize, this still is fascinating. But, sometimes it's as if I've simply transferred schools by coming here."

"Ha ha, that you have! I'm surprised your engineer didn't accompany you - this is his field, no?"

"Yes, but he's all preoccupied with the biological side. I imagine he's demanding the same time from Dr. Savelyevna, compiling his own survey of species included... no, this is more a personal interest." I tied together the stack of hardcopy blueprints I had been following along with, slotting them in with the rest of my notes. "But thank you again. This has been very, very valuable."

"Good!" he said, with a real smile. "I'm very glad. But is that all you wanted from today? You still look a bit nervous."

Good. "Ah... aha, I didn't mean..." I rubbed my temples, wincing. "Sel Nine, if I may ask... strictly after personal interest, not for the record. But were you raised in Dear Diadem? Or a nearby habitat?"

I saw a bristle in him, something in the way he raised his shoulders. "Between Diadem and Pearl Wall habitat prop-





er, yes. My family's estates are based in the set's own habitat." He held his smile, turned it apologetic. "I know it's not the same, but you know of fealty on a smaller scale... la, we can get back to the old drama if you ask, but..."

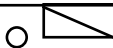
"No, no, I meant it, that isn't it. I'm not here for my superiors' paranoia. It's that I still think of your perspective on the sun, the talks we've had on scripture proper. I suppose half the reason I am making you run me through the whole structure of the receptor and spine is for my concern over sun, over distance..."

"Ahhh," he sighed, "that. The adaptation process still taking its toll?"

I nodded, meek. "Yes. And you must excuse me, the idea, a priest coming to you for theological advice..."

"A young professional coming to an older one, you mean." His arms were crossed - that slightly smug, surveying attitude he was so used to as a director.

"I've always thought of sunlight as a distant friend. One of many stars, but ours, just on the threshold. So, what I mean to ask... how did you see the sun, when you were younger, closer? Is it different, to be so adjacent to the



light, so... unherded by it? I only ask, because... my reservations about this place, if the core sun-ley qualities could be preserved even here, the nature of the interior's light. It scared me at first - the abrupt day cycle, the closeness, closer even than the See lies to the sun... it felt strange and alien. But did it seem the same to you? I fear..."

Pity was dripping and dripping from his face. Poor little knytt, he seemed to say, how sad it is you think of yourself as so distant. "No, you're alright," he said gruffly. "I understand. One's own relationship with the sun... exile has given me similar worries. How far away I feel from that light sometimes, even right next to so much of it. But even at Diadem, is that a pure sun? Through that rose-tinted glass sky? And pouring through the great windowed hull of Pearl Wall, the only habitat in the central configuration with those steel-reinforced sixths. I think everywhere we live finds a new sun, a new tint. Close, far, filtered as Savannah is! But it's all the same. We have the expertise for that, no?"

With profuse thanks, and letting him lead another little prayer at the wall of the sun well, I slipped out of that thundering place again.

I was running out of time, now. Today's session had far



and away satisfied all my feigned technical concerns, and soon I would have to find a new tack of stalling. How silly it seemed, now, to have been so afraid of such small difference!

From the docks, it was the same trip again and again. I was becoming accustomed to it, and it only felt eerier and eerier. The same blank storefronts and arcades and rumbling rails among the grand interconnections of the caps, the same sleepy statuary and quiet parks of the receptor.

It was gentle here, gray and green and gold. The high points of my trips to the reactor were certainly here, this courtyard, and how close a semblance it was to home. The familiar dull-dark gray of softcrete, the neatly-clipped and short vegetation as was customary in Ilian habitats, with only the occasional spreading and sturdy tree for support. The only things that truly stood out were the unmistakable statues, and that the shelters here were clearly patterned after weighted structures, gazebos and glass houses. The statues stood, grand and angular overlooking the hollow, and I let myself waft down to one of the little grooves between the trees, the softcrete channels that held the cafeterias and small supply stores catering to the receptor staff. Shady things, tucked away from the harsher lights,



alcoves of cafeteria seating, automated food vendors and a few showcase domes of hydroponic produce. Singular, but not such utter avatars as those inner-sanctum rooms were. And it was empty, at least in the hours I found here, with only the occasional lunic staff members in groups of two or three taking their quiet lunches here. I stayed away, aside from polite acknowledgements. People were becoming accustomed to our presence here, but still the fear. Always the fear.

I took two lunches, typical comfort-food lunic fare with garish package exteriors advertising the Savannah-grown ingredients of each - black bread and escargot? Those were all the ingredients listed, a strange and simple thing. One for me, one for Harka.

I tied my bag down to the perch underneath the awning of the gazebo that was becoming my favorite, wincing. All those bruises, from all my blundering across the corridors and the bonecrush pressure of the interior, had healed quickly but in that burning and knotted way the body loves to put its repairs through. The roof was an amusing conceit, patterned so after surface dwellings rather than the space-maximizing double-sidedness of Ilian architecture. And just as I was settling and making ready to eat,



just as I had found myself alone and with a modicum of peace - alas! None, there was no solace for me here.

“Hello!” It was the frivolous boy who had been gloating at Henar’s side at the brunch. Rain Flower, in all his orange and winding pinned silks, taller and darker than Beckon. His head popped down from the roof, clambering into view before perching, cross-legged, on the underside of the awning. “Lady liuetenant! I see you’ve made yourself comfortable here? Another meeting with the master’s husband? May I eat with you? Black bread, my! You’ll pick up our tastes if you hang around here much longer,” he grinned, already settled in with his cloak flowing lightly around him.

I deliberately took a bite of bread. “Regards, sel...?”

“Lock Wave, Lock Wave,” he said, proudly and primly gesturing to his chest by way of introduction. “I’ve heard on the wind your sessions with our director.”

“Ah. You work in the receptor, then.”

“Well, yes, ehe, by on the wind I suppose I mean seeing you through the windows every day. Still up and at it, collecting blueprints?” He motioned to my bag - arm dart-



ing out again in a flash, retreating just as quickly into his shifting cloak.

"Yes," I said cautiously. "I apologize, Rain Flower, but I am bound to not speak overmuch on my interviews. They are very delicate procedures, personal for my subjects, and integral to the project. If you have concerns, shall I put you in contact with our liaison? His is the role that fields questions such as this, and -"

"Lieutenant," he drawled, disappointed. "La, I know you're not learning much here that you couldn't get from any hardhull habitat. You're waffling." He stopped - I was pushing a look of slow outrage onto my face. "I don't mean to be direct. Well, I do. But I think we're at a crossroads. I only, only want to talk!"

Why was he whining as if it would woo me? "As I said, Rain, this is simply not my role."

He leaned in conspiratorially, changing tack. "Ahem, yes. Then I would like very much to speak to your liaison, very much. In fact, if you'd grant me an audience on your ship? Tonight perhaps?"

"Impossible. We -"





"Tonight. Perhaps. Unless you've plans? Watch the clayliner pull in together? You'll think about it, you'll remember my name? After all, I am a certain level of closeness to the master, there are words I could pass along."

"Sel," I said firmly, stretching out of perch and making to leave. "If this is an extortion, you will get nowhere. I'm sorry, but this is unacceptable, and I am not swayed. If I've need of speaking with set Pearl Wall, I will make the meeting."

"No! No, listen, I know. Not all of the quarter does. But the master, and Beckon... ahh, wouldn't you listen! I'm not trying to buy you, I'm here to beg while able! Will you have me spell it out? I want," he said, finding his firmness, "my foot in the door. You have the lay of the land, the political fault lines. You have the gun loaded!" His voice dropped to a furiously fast and velvety whisper. "You're playing with upper management, and playing with Beckon besides, and very well, we can play more. I have access. I can give you the entirety of the lunic quarter's standpoint, the intimate ear of the master. In return, spare him a thought. Things will fall into place very quickly, from here on."

Ah, the third strategy, utter forwardness. I tried to roll with the punch, not think too hard yet of just what know-



ing meant. "...Does he know you're doing this?"

"No. Not yet." His smile was back now, and doubly sly. "The master is preoccupied with his own worries. Once it was clear you were not sent by his swamp of a family, he entirely stopped caring at what this audit would find. Ha! His part done, yes yes. But this was in your orders, no? Focus on the lunics, pin any impropriety on the exiles? But that's wrong, la, that's wrong, lieutenant, and you know. My master built this place, built it after his own bones, but he was not responsible, not privy to the subject of your plans for tonight. We've only made the best of it. If you care about that, care about the truth, bring me! Take me. It will work."

God, was this his intimidation? This half-raised voice, wild eyes in this wide room? The statues loomed beside us, in line with the carved cataracts of stony sunlight, impassive.

"God damn it. Very well, you'll come and speak to the prefect at least. She will decide if you'd be oathed."

"Yes! Yes yes and yes, you have my word now, that -"

"Not now, you fool! I said oath."

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The stars turned outside the kitchen windows, and one more brightly than the rest. Nothing to do but wait; the deceleration would be finished with... soon, so soon that it was pain.

Anyndelhataman had cheerfully informed us a routine clayliner was pulling in - Hightower built, Ilian leased. Raw materials, burned out from the wheel, the drip-feed that was still necessary in these last phases of construction. Asteroid clay to be fired in the sunfurnaces ringing the receptor zones, raw iron and inert carbon... it must have been brought in from Glauheft, the closest major Ilian settlement before the sparseness of the Hildas... and how far, far away that was.

A message was coming for us, brought in from that station of the cycle. I had consulted the turning-records - Matali's ship would not be passing there for a full two thirds of her cycle. Years.

I stayed for some minutes, watching the blaze.

The kitchen was becoming a rare oasis in the increasingly crowded ship. Parts of its modular structure had been disassembled and moved to the women's dorm, one of the fridges and the main range entirely, leaving whole stretch-





es of the walls here empty as the rest of Umihotaru was overstuffed. Kuryo had commandeered what had been our quarters, and only Anahit had stayed. Absorbed were the both of them in each other, their discussions taking up so much of their efforts that it was becoming frightening. Bettany and Henarl had taken to sleeping in the library with overwork, and I was not much better.

I lingered at my gathered stash of rations. Each time I returned to the ship I brought with me as many cafeteria packets as I could manage in, I suppose, some feeble instinct to stockpile for storm. Red risotto, blueberry pork, hemp nutrient bars, the black bread - overly spicy and dense to the point of wetness, but bread regardless, and comically filling. Harka was having great reams of fun picking through the variety of food here, in between bragging about eir own cuisine, the gray brick stoves and intricate seafood stir fries e liked the best back home.

I left the kitchen quietly, just brushing against the walls and handles as I pushed off. I glanced into the library opposite from the kitchen - only Kaitei, earphones in, measuring out his maintenance tasks for the week. And the still securely locked airlock door, waiting for Rain's arrival in hours. I turned the corner to the main corridor, leading



to the larger rooms in the ship, the dark wood-paneled string of cubbyholes that made up our personal offices.

I'd moved my hammock into mine. Easier to be close to my workstation and growing records, and cozily soundproofed away from the passing noise of the waking ship. All four sides of the corridor were lined with simple square cupboard-doors, some for storage and some for what little space was allotted for purely personal use.

I slid open the portal to my poor inner sanctum here and Harka was entirely tangled in my hammock.

Bettany thrust her arm out expectantly, and I handed her her lunch, long since resigned. They started up again, tearing up the packet together like overactive siblings, just as the door closed again.

"And the next!" Harka cried, untangling eir claws from the hammock mesh and swinging haphazardly around the already very small place. Salt and grain, salt and grain, e was becoming addicted to the stuff. Without natural mineral deposits, proper matter-reclamation infrastructure, or even seas as Heath had, salt was vanishingly rare across Savannah below us and easily worth its weight in gold. Gold? What did they even use for exchange? Regardless, e



tore into it carelessly

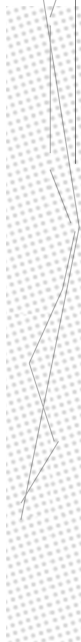
“Gah. Snail worm,” e said, picking them one by one out of the packet and letting them drift around the room. “I will not eat these. But the bread!”

“Harka!” I called, scandalized, “I am the one that must sleep here!” But Bettany only laughed, picking them out of the air herself.

“You,” she said, the two of them already fluttering with laughter over the shared spoils, “are so picky. Why do you insist on such limits on this culinary adventure?”

E said nothing, only ripping into the bread further with a warm glint in eir eye. But I quieted. I had not eaten them either, after Rain had interrupted me. The taste of river water, sand in my mouth...

Bettany reduced herself to mere snickers, reestablishing herself on my perch. She’d taken over my desk as soon as I’d left the room. Likely, I’d had nightmares about exactly this moment, the preening prefect rifling through this sliver of an inner sanctum I had! But my shelves and closets were still untouched, and I took a breath. There was work to be done.





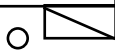
I nestled on the opposite wall as they. “I think,” Betta ny said, scrolling through a file open on my workstation, “Harka’s gotten me a serviceable understanding of eir end of the process now. And I’ve finished reading your notes - do they really supply you with no real documentation? Even Anahit’s equipment comes with instruction manuals...”

“I suppose my lavendry is a tool of luxury. Hers is far more integral to the crew,” I nodded. “But regardless of position, the trance is a deep secret. A corporate secret, even. Not meant to be known among crews, much less among Ilion as a whole, much less the Ecumene entire. It is a great risk I take, passing the art to you. These are not capabilities that should be known.”

“Huh? I think you’re overrating it.”

“You do not yet understand the gravity of the wonderland, prefect. It is a terrible thing, and as spiritual as it is functional. Most of those rejected from the lieutenant’s course are ones who cannot bear the vision of it, and there are many of them.”

“No, I mean about the secrecy. It can’t be that serious.” What was she talking about? This was the crux of it, the



human memory bank that made this life, this work, at all parseable - her face tightened. "No, clearly there are the rules in place. But things like this must become known among the crews that stay together, and the most effective ones do. Look, how easily we were pushed to start sharing like this. It must be common knowledge in the veteran circles. And, going off your Sever preliminaries - the Board employs neotenes as interrogators, and surely their eyes could not be pried away so easily? The silver fixation on secrets? Really, Sever must at least know, or else not have the ambition we thought of him. And, I mean, Kuryo..."

That was it. That was it. "Harka..." I hazarded.

"Yes," e replied. "At camp you sat with Kali and dreamt. Is it the same art? No, for the wrong skull, but thought weaves through. This is the magic of blue, and that the cityless sing smoothest. Surely she."

"You said," Bettany said, looking at me evenly, "that it felt like flaying, Emelry. Caustic? I'll decline, if this is being drugged into terrors. What did you even mean?"

"It isn't that! I meant... what I saw there, the interaction was the problem, not the faculty itself. It was sudden. It was adapting to the memories of an entirely different





body! Think of it, bones change when you make a wing - pinfeathers!“ I shuddered. “It was very... Gah. Entire new languages of sense. But we’re the same kind of human, prefect - I... it still does scare me. The potential is new, for all of us.”

Quiet in the room. She frowned, turning it over in her head. “Oh, alright. If you can bear it then so can I. But we remain in the basics, for now, I want no adventure until I’ve a baseline of skill. And Harka - I want you to step in with any input, as well. This is all exploratory.”

“Yes,” e nodded.

So we began. Bettany and I strapped into the padded perching chairs in the wan light of the workstation screen, Harka keeping to the edge of the room with eir gleaming eyes, taking us in at all different angles. I took her hands in mine.

“We begin with an image,” I said, “and please meet my eyes, it is necessary for the teaching. It must be an image we are both thoroughly familiar with. Usually this is done with the focus of the detector, a small thread of jade to reliably tie your mind to. But we will begin with memory alone. What will it be? A place on the ship?”



"No, I don't think I would be very connected to any of that. Let me think," she looked away, eyes flitted to Harka for help, but quickly realized e would have nothing to say - still watching us impassively, eir cocked head shimmering with those streaks of ultraviolet. "Ohh... what was the hall they used for graduation, actually? The one with the big window to the geofront."

"Igumo Memorial. Did you even spend much time there, though? I doubt it, if you've forgotten the name in only a few months."

Her hands clenched, "Oh please. Is that your only objection? I passed plenty of time there, awards ceremonies you weren't at."

"Fine. Graduation, then? We can work with that."

"Good!" she grinned. "Where do we start? Just focus on the memories?"

"Yes." I took a deep breath, perched a little straighter, and let myself slip into the steady, confident, calm voice my instructors had used. "You must fully inhabit yourself there. Think in terms of release-meditation, and how one by one it shuts down sectors of the body. You must be intentional





in this way, inhabit in the same way. Replicate the moment fully, and work it, inch by inch, through your entire body. From the air on your skin to the color of the light. Nostalgia, your thoughts and fondness, are helpful as an anchor, but do not contribute to the mechanism. It is of the body, fundamentally." I breathed deep in, deep out. "We will close our eyes, and begin."

"Already?"

"Yes. Close your eyes, but keep them fixed on mine."

"What?" she said, a hint of incredulous laugh.

"Eye contact must be maintained. It will function the same as a jade anchor, since you haven't had time or supply to bond with one. Maintain the focus and position of your eyes completely straight. To look around, you must turn your head only in the wonderland. Rely on that recreated set of muscles, use them, and freeze your outer ones."

"Alright. This might be a few days of getting it right, even normal meditation has never been for me. But alright." She took a great gulp of air and clamped her eyes shut - I slowly closed mine.





“I’ll begin.”

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“I was tense that day. Stiff in formalwear. The thick wool veil a bit too tight, itching around my ears and neck. I couldn’t sit still.”

“Mine was black silk. Beautiful, but sliding off my hair terribly then, and hot in the lamplight. Did you know, it was longer those months ago? I thought to be presentable at dock.”

“On topic, please. More about the body. My arms were heavy. I picked at the little ridges in my fingernails. I perched next to Lhani Noornoor. My feet were pinched, I had only bought my formal sandals the day before.”

“Uhh. I was hungover.”

“Prefect! Why do you -”

“Shut up! It was an important sensation anchor, or whatever you’d call it, no? A little headache. A shard of red was shining in my eye from that great window. Mon was about to speak, and I was so fidgety about it, the tension of if my sleepy old advisor would pull his vigor out today... Sleepy.



Arms held behind my back. I... I don't remember who I was next to or anything..."

"Quite alright. Your deeper memory will fill in with time. Are you beginning to feel it? As if you were there, now, but with eyes closed."

"Yes. I can imagine the surroundings, but not truly see them. But... oh! Oh, that red light, that I can see?"

"Good! Good. Tell me about the window itself. Build it out, look to it, moving only your head, as your head was that day."

"Alright. Alright. A great circle of glass, as large as the whole opposite wall we perched on. Ah! The red was from the outer ring of stained glass rosettes... the central facet, with the winged emblem in red and blue..." Bettany recited, focusing properly as I'd asked her. "The wrought iron frame. Lord Mon all colored purple in the light, hah."

"We don't need to jump to the speech yet."

Her hands shifted in mine, annoyed. But she continued. "Sixteen panes of glass for the stations of the Wheel. Those mother-of-pearl mural walls. Everyone in formalwear, the



same we wore... Adonai, Emelry, have we gotten out of these things since landing? I'm so sick of uniform..."

I shushed her. "Just a few more details. Anywhere your eyes were wandering, or kept coming back to?"

She thought. I thought. "The chatter before the speech began... seemed a bit hushed. Ah! Oh, alright, I'm ! The red was from the fourth station, top right, Rioros! I can see the emblems, the ice-saws and three flowers?"

And then I was there.

"Oh!" she cried, and we were out again. I opened my eyes. Harka had fluttered closer, concerned and craning eir neck, but kept eir quiet for us.

"What was that?"

"I... I yeah, that worked. Headache, headache already. Wow. That's absurd?"

"Not really. You'll find the capacity is quite inbuilt, its learning the triggers that is the problem. The state comes quickly, and should be stable. Why did you break out?"

"The shock! You just do this, regularly?"



“Sparingly.” I smiled half apologetically, half smug. “It is headache and worse, however. A trial.”

She groaned, but quickly swept my hands up again and closed her eyes like a child making a show of counting to ten. I followed suit - the window, again, the red wing and blue wing and Lord Mon’s aged and taut face

She sighed, deep and breathy. “Alright. Alright. I’m... I understand the room. I’m there. But I don’t know where I am, no sense of perspective. Where am I seeing this from? Should I find myself in the crowd?”

But we were already there again, in just an instant, the sunlight on our skin, and the chatter of the student body. The stars turned, past that window, and past the window even further that separated the geofront from the void, and the walls of Saniasa.

“When Ilion,” intoned Lord Mon in that carrying and booming voice that he threw at larger rooms, so different from the measured whisper he had in lectures, “was seeded into the wheel, and given our cultures and names by right of its stations. When the indigo clans were separated, and began to build, a quality was revealed. A quality not of blood, not of land, but of perspective. The wheel is harsh,



and dark, and sparse, and hewn of terrible stone. But this ascetic way determined one thing: witness. Many are the souls of the world, and many are their color. But what does ours tell us of our ordained industry and task?

"I served as prefect for six audits aboard my Janthina. Six newborn cities I visited, six secret histories I compiled. The first was New Rackton. It was built for the Delphic mandala, museum of ages, and was the first Acrean-mimic habitats to qualify for the role. It's way of life was a portrait of those rough and great mining towns of the red star's surface, their close-knit skeleton garrisons. So many worlds met in that idea. So many paces of people. Such oldness and such newness, at that the shrine of shrines. And my second was a cult.

"A tiny, nondescript place in the canopy. Hibiscus Hill. Population in the low thousands, same as before. None of the weight - a frugal commission by a ragtag group of unemployed - the first warning sign, and most common case in the canopy. We were diligent. They thought we would only look hard at the incubator records, all of sanctioned baseline stock. That we would be uninterested in the schools."

A hush fell over the room. Bettany felt it too, hands cold



in memory of how those words had echoed out. Here his doddering and simple manner turned to the incision we knew from him.

“My longest audit. Years spent managing the recovery. Things that were unspeakable. A generation raised in a blind fugue state, minds exploded to base foundation by the enforced psychedelic regimen. There was not even the malice, no typical abuse, a true and searing belief in their strange ambitions. To cut was to free, to warp was to grow. Impermissible within this ecumene, and in this world entire, was not their actions that mere janitors could clean up, but their spirit. The ethos their city was meant to follow. And that was why we knew. The only reason we could know, is to understand that central core of each place we visit. For then we see their shape, how accurately it conforms or diverges from the blueprint. Which of their structures keep the darkness out, and which that allow it to bleed in.”

Bettany huffed a silent laugh at his mention of “darkness”, and at great risk to this little experiment I stabbed my nails a moment into her hands to chastise. How kind, how kind a place like Hibiscus Hill now seemed in Savannah’s pale light of example.



“And my fourth audit was Kozue’s bicentennial!” Mon said, kindly, letting air seep into that hall again by us students’ relieved chuckles. “And what a festival that was. What is one to make of this? This position, at our border, that your crews will find themselves in? How do we bear the new things, these unproven places, and the terrible potential they carry, terrible more by far than all the tools of Ilion’s mines. For Ilion has a life in the world, the wheel is a true tellurian wonder, and its pace held. But not so for us. Not so, for priests.

“We must be outside of and among the world, as the wheel is outside and among the worlds of humanity. The world that was given to us is spread a thousand thousand miles further than the others, in union with its orbit entire. And this is why we see. This is why the task of history is ours. We are those branches of void grown back into the soil -” and the air stilled. His mouth froze into position, all sound stopped. And suddenly the headache hit. And not the usual wonderful headache that had been slowly building, but a stabbing one that unsettled even my core, stomach vinegary and churning.

Bettany interrupted, with a strained, quick tone of voice I’d never heard from her “Emelry?” she said, in the first



stages of panicking, “Is this supposed to happen? Um, Lhani, Lhani is right next to me, and...”

And there was a flurry of black and ultraviolet, and my body stayed anchored but my vision churned warped, and there was that sense of body, bones twisting and disappearing, and laughing and laughing through the air, and that great window of the wheel exploded in my vision and I - we - were through it, past, into the geofront.

Saniasa was old enough to have one. One of the old cities, first of the stations, from the initial colonization. As Ilion was born it clustered around the larger rocks, bored massive routes into the greatest and most stable prizes - even today, bits of Saniasa continue to be sheared away. This place, this cavity that was now garden, was once dense, dense village, and before that pure mine. The very pit of an asteroid, hollowed out for cheap and easy shielding against the winds of the void, a starting point to carve the way out of. And as the city matured and modernized, the place became a memory and a center - we both knew it as a place to take lunches in, where the rowdier students held their sporting-days, that deep leathery green of the ironbushes that thrived on raw rock, between the great glass window of Igumo, and the lens that covered the old



breach into the center.

And it was dazzling. I was seeing it for the first time. Seeing these trees for the first time, the wild brambles and perennial fruits, the smell of the air, how rich and how harsh - sterile, crystal, metallic, like flowers without the nectar, choking on graphite. Laughing and laughing. The glass cracked in both places, end to end.

I came to, panting, clinging to the wall. Harka had crashed into the opposite wall e had been at before, a few loose feathers still drifting in spirals through the air, and was all achatter with desperate apology. It had only been a moment, a moment catching eir eye in the break between our study - and that was enough.

The voice laughing had been Harka's - but awake, Bettany was the one roaring with it.

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An hour or so after we had recovered, Bettany was perching at arm's length with two fingers on Rain's forehead. "In free will and in faith, oath that by these terms your service stands. That you will abide by the dictates of each role of the crew, and that all said amongst us will remain so."





"You really have to do this for everyone?" Kuryo whispered from next to me. "But not for the emissary Harka."

"Who will have universal privilege and independence aboard this ship for as long as I am second in command,"

I hissed back - a bit too much venom, alas - without even turning my head. You picked up curtness quickly with her... or, at least, most had. Anahit, from her other side, glanced aghast at me but had long since been overruled, and contented herself with clinging to the old woman's side in their mutual barricade.

Rain exuberantly consented, so grave it seemed almost like mockery. "Then I pronounce you independent of all corporate charters, and bound to service of law crew Umihotaru," Bettany finished intoning. She neatly withdrew her hand, touched those two fingers to her opposite palm for a long moment, then spread her arms wide. "Welcome then! To our growing menagerie of deputies. God help whoever is watching these camera feeds. And speaking of cameras! Kaitei, is everything set up?"

A kakaka from Harka, who had long since negotiated a perfect obscurity for our little section of the docks. Kali's command of Savannah's server systems, or whoever e had working so persistently on these things, was crude, un-



predictable, but so far foolproof. Rain looked around the room with eyes sparkling.

"Ah, I think... so." Kaitei fiddled with his work station, and the screens before us added a few extra views alongside the mains. "Camp of Kali! Can you hear us?"

"Yes," soared the king's voice, even as the drones continued taking their places and finding their views. "Introductions have been made, comrades. Thank you for witnessing this showcase. Harka! Call!"

"Beautiful," Harka croaked from where e had perched, protectively, near Didion. "We sing and laugh and eat. All is strong."

Kali nodded, and the preparations continued. Kuryo kept whispering at me.

"Why, lieutenant, why did you bring the boy? Why're you the one always throwing our door open? Does Henarl like the whit that much?"

"Will you stop your laughing, if you are so concerned? Moves must be made, Kuryo, you've spurred us to action yourself." My voice was spiritless, and Anahit gasped. But





she did not argue, only gave me a long glare. More strangers, more strangers, she seemed to cry out from her forehead, more weight on this sunk ship.

But it was almost enough to laugh about, how colorful our austere library had become. On our side, one crowded room of strangers bracing for the worst. On theirs, a beautiful, fragrant day, rock dust kicked in a haze above the fields below, and the cliff above flowering in colorful flags and tents against the cold, harsh light of the spine. When Didion and I were in the interior, we left behind a drone package of ten or so clustered together, and Kali's camp had taken the liberty of putting them to perfect use. One clung like a spider to the corner of the royal tent; Kali and Likin and two others I did not recognize - who, in fact, seemed entirely out of style with any tengmu I had seen so far - beside them.

"Ynewy of the End," Kuryo declared, "and High-sevens from the reserved third. Introductions will be made. Relax."

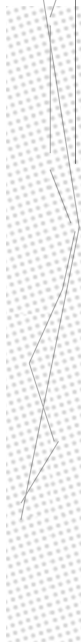
"Where does this expertise come from, I'd ask? I've heard of you," Rain replied sharply. Bettany immediately swung to me, seeming to say please, please no bickering today, not after all the ceremony. We must have sparked enough ten-



sion in the air that Kuryo made some smug noncommittal gesture and continued watching the screen.

Other drones. One far above the plains and cliff both, its feed panning across the vista of low, dark trees and tall, tall yellow grasses, punctuated by the vibrant patterns of billowing cloth. Atop the cliff was a great host of uniformed crows, in simple but bulky leather vests dyed the peculiar blue-yellow-green color that the skyland itself took on. Yet other drones were carried by some in that crowd - and surrounding them were onlookers, other small camps keeping to themselves, and several dozens of independent tengmu investigating the edges.

And down on those plains, at the long stretch before the cliffs, between distant forest and rushing rocky stream, was a vast herd of bright-red deer. I'd seen them, before, on the billboards of Savannah's empty lots as I passed them to and fro. "Regazelles", one of many quirky-appearing yet mundane-behaving signature species of the place. Their hide was like cherries, their horns angularly formed to the point of impractical zigzag. Stuffed toys in their image lined up on shelves, like the blueslate turtles and green condors in so much of the promotional materials. Materials that remained systematically empty of crows.





Kali and Ynewy were speaking in a low chatter, too soft and swift for us to catch - or had the drone been muted? Kali, dressed in a spectacular cloak, proud red and white waterfall patterns, that gave the simultaneous impression of imposing stature and a swaddled infant. Ynewy was dressed as those of the distant, separate camps were - wingblades lined with affixed hooks, ruffled and deeply reddened fur. Where Kali and eir kin wore light and intentional markings of henna, it seemed worked in handfuls throughout all Ynewy's feathers, the whole body over... e was larger too, larger by far, the coating only accentuating the difference. E was probably my size.

Kali abruptly stood up and sang. A full minute, in calls and caws that seemed almost familiar, half familiar, something literally out of a dream... The dream I'd shared with em, that separate nymph language...?

Kuryo stepped in, no longer in that teasing tone of voice. "E gives this speech each time. The wonders of technology and coordination, what this demonstration is meant to accomplish."

"Which is? Attracting members?" Bettany asked.

"The city wants to grow," Kuryo shrugged. "And e is per-



suasive.”

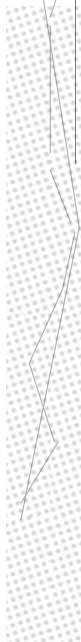
“Kuryo is regrettably not a poet,” Harka spoke clearly from where e lurked behind Didion. “The king speaks of plenty and health. Blades of the end, bounty of the third, basis of Quay. This is vision showcase. Scoff, Kuryo, at scrabble - but always today is the work of city.”

Her eyes flamed. A kind of silent offense in her that surged and smoothed, “It should be starting now, at least. Let’s watch, if that’s the point.”

The regiment of tengmu had walked towards the edge of the cliff, and the bird at the front of the party stiffened, and called out orders - left wing, right wing, herding formation talk like a pilot or navigator, until a great “Launch!” and a sheet of mottled black, like a horizontal waterfall, poured off the cliff as a hundred crows took flight.

The one called High-sevens, jumped at the noise of all those wings hitting air, and leapt out of their shared sitting area, off the cliff in just moments to follow, at a slow and broad spiral, the forward-pressing flock as they rushed, bodies overlapping enough to cast a dissolute

“You and I,” Ynewy said, in a voice so high it seemed at





odds with eir large body, and in a tone clearly unused to human phonetics, “and a nymph named for card games.”

“How kind that you can speak for our guests’ benefit, my friend!” Kali cried back happily. “And no no no. This is the reaction I want. The interest! Look at that wheeling joyous. I am never a salesman.”

“As you pitch and preach,” Ynewy seemed to groan, but nodded in an understanding. “Ah. Now we will see the use you will put all my head to.”

“Watch, then. See, see!”

One of the supplementary feeds - a spycam Kali had stuck onto some fresh-feathered young hunter - broke from the spreading diamond of wings. The angle shifted, horizon pitching up slightly before plummeting down, ground rising far too fast, suddenly a deer crumpling from red into red and then again, pitching up into the climb, taking another slug from eir holster. And on the wider screens, it continued. A tengmu would drop out of the sky, neatly deposit a flechette in the skull of a deer from a perfectly-aimed terminal velocity vantage point, before veering off in a series of great shared arcs to aim again. The herd fell quietly, with no panic passing through it, only the edg-





es of the group falling with nary a grunt. Many of the survivors simply continued grazing, worry only beginning to grip them once those far-off birds began circling back, and the blood began seeping at their hooves.

It was then that they bolted, in all directions, the remnant fourth part of the already decimated herd scrambling, wild-eyed, to get away. But the herd itself was gone, scattered and silent. The deer that were left had been the ones sheltered in the center, and now they had no red tails before them to follow, and stumbled panicking over the bodies of their kin. As the bulk of the tengmu host descended onto the pile of corpses, pulling out rope and knives from the leather packs strapped to them, and resupplies already gliding in from the cliff again, the elite of the flock chased down the stragglers. And now we heard each body fall as they were picked off further away from the central pile of wing-churned charnel, no longer the raindrop thudding of dull metal and heavy bodies, but just scattered, distant falls.

And then the dust was settled. The pools of blood in the soil were small. The hunting-flock stepped out of the sky onto the ground in little yellow puffs of grass and sand, barking orders and updates to each other in the quick,





staccato callsigns that rang far through the air. “Li!” “Ka!” “Hei!” coughed cracking into the sky, as they hopped together around the edges of the pile of deer.

The hunt had lasted minutes, but the butchery would last an hour. We watched it all in silence - the body of crows, of Quay and beyond, was far too absorbed and occupied for chatter to us, or more speeches. Ynewy spoke silently and in song to those of eir own retinue - tengmu almost eir size, from the neat sheet-metal parts of the camp that contrasted Kali’s colorful ones. And Kali emself only watched breathless.

But e leapt up in turn at some point. Kali, at the upper camp, was now pacing amongst the procedures here, hobbling and gesturing between the uniformed crows that had lingered above. As those below divided into groups of five, the ones still on the cliff divided into groups of four, and began gliding down, group by group, with unwieldy beams of wood strung between them.

As they landed below, the ground teams had advanced in their work. The carcasses had been tied with thick black rope, dragged into neat rows, and as the wood-carriers landed, things like gibbets began to rise - the beams riveted right into the ground in A-frames, the deer hoisted



by their hind legs, their throats cut and blood collected in great clay bowls. The five-bird teams worked quickly, practiced, incisive, quickly gutting and flensing each body, taking them apart like puzzle pieces. Four rope-heaving tengmu to hold the bodies in place, two with blades affixed to their beaks to devote to butchery. The hide was passed off, like an assembly line to be scraped and cleaned, the corpses cut down and the hides strung back up in an unending flurry of wings and beaks and claws.

Soon the field was transformed - hides left stretched on drying racks, muscles and meat separated by cut and laid out on, bodies disappeared from the impromptu gibbets for there were simply no bodies left. At this point, the better portion of one of the upper groups - those that displayed as High-sevens did, eir - actually, his? her? - compatriots, the ones Kuryo had been watching were already dropping down in turn, chattering and investigating.

And soon they were all done. By the stream, the great piles still grew and continued to be sorted. A field of bones, cleaned briskly in the river that was now running a clean pink, neatly organized precisely by type. Side by side by side.

Kali sang from the top of the emptying cliff in a simply





impossible voice

“Take,” Kuryo said, translating from the nymph-calls without being asked, “from here the things you like and can carry. The wealth of Quay and you. The first was of knowing. The head fang beyond fin foot feather. Where is the song? Is song in bone? Is song in blood? Is song in word? Is this world known to you? Look. Look at life on life and the fire of life. Song is in the shine of fire. A song to make Savannah red. The head claw to eat herds, to make river, to do it forever. Become a head and sing, be looked at. How easy this is!”

Kali finished, satisfied, and went to speak with Ynewy without another glance down the cliff. The frenzy continued, the entire gathered group of tengmu leaping from the cliff and beginning the negotiations of the spoils. The feeds unceremoniously shut down as wings, claws, beaks found them and quietly deactivated them.

“Is that it? Truly what e said?” I asked Harka.

“And well spoken,” e nodded. Kuryo, for her part, stayed as calm and subdued as her recitation had been.

I had not quite realized it. I had been so caught up in



the rush, the clockwork coordination. How long this must have taken! The practice, the skill, the mastery of craft, to spread out like locusts and secure food and materials for so many! How long would those gathered here eat from this act alone, this paltry hour of effort? These bones and hides, what edifice from them alone.

So I really hadn't realized. All around me, faces were pale and silent. Anahit, freed from her attentively obedient posture now that there was nothing to watch, curled up into herself and looked as if she was about to cry, or vomit, or something worse. Kaitei stared at the emptied screens still deep in thought, frustrated and reserved.

"Aha. La, what? What was this? I - ahaha - I was told..." Rain struggled - composed, amused - "I was told it was a city in the walls? Sever said..."

"A wonderful demonstration," Kuryo spat, "a perfect show of force! Oh, just some steel-flashing, how aspirational! It's what I expected. Lyly, it's what I told you it would be. It is what comes from someone whose word for human is cattle."

Quiet.





“We are here,” Bettany said, rising and smoothing the air over, “to make this the most blood we see in this audit. Let’s be done with the day. Sleep on it. Debrief and discuss.” But already the room was emptying.



They filtered out quickly, back to quarters and cubbies – no room for real discussion with Harka and Kuryo so on the brink of bickering. “I don’t think it went over well.”

“Ka.”

“I think it went badly, Kali. I’ll have to talk them all through it, tomorrow... it was read as a threat.”

“Kaka! Squeamishness simply. Redname’s influence. It will fade, the longer speaking rope she takes. For you it was informative, not demonstrative.”

“I understand. I do.”

“Why?” eir voice whispered uncompressed over my earpiece, along with the whistling wind. “Interior sapped your capacity for the shock. Did the air look delicious? Savannah is a sweet land, to fault, but sweet.”



“Enough to make those gallons of blood sweet, I suppose.”

I sighed. My office viewscreen was still mostly dark - on the flight back to Quay, the drone camera I was seeing through was nestled next to Kali, wrapped in cloth. There was a shaky view of the sky, the long pale line of the nighttime spine, and glimpses far, far away of lines of fire. On the other side of this world burned the borders of the third - the territory of those Kali called the stragglers and Kuryo called the land's true people, the tengmu still living without organization. I could scarcely imagine what the End was, yet. But beneath those lines of light drawn through all the air's muddle, the city Quay would soon shine.

“We are unpacking you alright now. Tell me when you've sight.”

“Yes, I have it now.” A dark and shimmering night was even further revealed as I crawled the devise out from the cloths it had been peeking out of.

“Fly with us down. Here you are.”

The view unmoored, the little spycam drone it was attached to rising from the flying carpet Kali emself was nestled in. Carried by three of eir dedicated guards, a lit-





tle hammock's worth of surveying space. Before them, the head of the flock was thick with similar formations, blocking out the growing and growing lights from the ground as the hundreds of birds carried hundreds of pounds of cargo between them. Were we high up enough to lessen the weight? It couldn't be. "Drop below us," Kali squawked, with a little wave of the wingblade, and I did.

Past the carrying-cloths, the night lit up. Quay lay like a mossy jewel before us, turquoise stone and so many candles.

The city was resplendent.

I had only seen nights in the interior as pitch dark, but this night was blue and pure and in the air was the sound of wings. The countless lanterns of the city glinted from between the gaps in the wicker-adobe buildings, but also splayed light across the wandering thoroughfares, those straight roads strung between great trees and the meandering bramble passes. And through the whole city was a great river, a great bay, that glowed from beneath with some unknown light! The city was built around its swell, the widest point for miles - and one could see miles of it. The river shone so strongly that one could see its currents moving, from one end of the town to the other and dim-





ming off as it stretched, stretched in both directions. Even at this hour the surface was dotted with fishing boats. The mottled teal light threw itself especially on the center of the city - the grandest building, a massive dome on the water's edge - and this was my destination. I watched as the drone grew closer and closer, eventually alighting atop the platform encircling the opening in its roof.

The rest of the convoy plummeted from the sky above me, the spans of cloth turning to parachute and neatly dropping the spoils from the cliff fields in new fields, parks and clearings on the floor of the city, like parts of the black sky falling and crumpling. We came in high, and flew down low. It seemed deserted but for shadows, how dark plumage bled so easily into the night aside from subtle flashes of fire caught in eyes, or the glinting iridescence of henna or blue.

Tiered little basket-houses. Colorful sailcloth limp in the breeze, so much scaffolding and netting between the neatly-planted trees - pulleys substituting for roads, little networks of signal and commerce. I was drinking in everything I could, every inch of the place I could see, and see bizarrely closely - but this search was vain skittering off the elephant at the center of the town. Wicker again - as





if woven from tree trunks, zones high, lit in mandala patterns all across its sides. The whole town shook like flame in the wind.

“Borrowed”, Kali said. “Primitive? Ka, little birds living in trees. The height of Triactian science, beneath their use. With their lore wood melts and flows, jumps, sculpting streams into ice. These are useful. Hives, shields. But now come we see.” E spoke to me from inside. And I let the drone dip down, find a landing space among the tengmu gathered on the roof, who scattered as i touched down. They all stared, awed and stirred but unafraid.

A sensible portal at the top of each building, roofed for rain and high for access. But this place was fitted with an ornate pagoda structure ringed with great lanterns, whiter paper ones stretched in columns, great wooden ones with what appeared bonfires inside. Here was commotion. But they let me pass, wide-eyed and growing more curious, and from that portal looked with me down upon the center hollow of the building.

Masses of perches. Tengmu of all stripes, from the end and third and Quay both, all, but largely in the livery of the city - that red leather and silver. The interior... the throne room? The speaking house, I overheard. The grave tree.



It was more than a tree. Fifty trees woven together, man-grovelike, into a sort of dome - trunks interwoven in a rising spiral lattice littered with leaves, surprisingly regular and maintained, well lit all the way up. At the center of the room stood another tree, a smaller one, roots clustered around a warped shell of strange, semi-translucent white structure... and that central tree spread upwards, its highest branches somehow twining around the edges, giving this amazing verdancy lit up by - once again - an absolute superfluity of lantern.

A chatter and a clacking filled the room. The hushed talk of crows preparing for the feast - and something else.

It took some time for me to work it out. Not until we had descended to the floor level and looked up, up at those ringed walls of greenery... beside the lanterns, also strung up in the trees, strung up in equal number.... was thousands, thousands of skeletons of tengmu.

Gemstones glittered in their eyes, and trust an Ilia to know the distinction between gem and stained glass. These were true. Each one was carefully posed - this one with wings still spread, these two perched with beaks nuzzling in each others necks. This one in a great dive, like those the hunters dared earlier in the day - but frozen in place





now, forever at the moment of terminal velocity, flechette still clutched in both claws. At first they were invisible, lost in the shape-obscuring jumble of irregular branches - but now that I saw them, they were inescapable, and defined the room. As I grasped their placement further, it made clear the structure of the place - how the branches were not haphazard, but rather grown in vast steady spirals up the inner walls of... whatever word could possibly live up to the function of this building. The palace. The heart. The grave tree.

Kali had bid me touch down beside the strange white structure at its center, that irregular wreck. At least, I was told it was, but it matched no ship model I knew. As I settled the drone, stowing its rotors and clicking out skittery legs, Likin emerged still bedecked in eir silvers from some hidden hollow in the structure, and pecked once at the rim of the camera.

“Arrival.”

The air was buzzing with the chatter of crows. I had thought this would be some speech or presentation, but the more I strained to make out the words, the quieter the crowd fell. This was no gathered congregation, I realized; all the speeches had been made at the cliff. I remembered.



This was a place of scholars - not just lanterns hung from those branches, not just bodies, but also great cases of books, ringed with reading-platforms and tengmu-sized perches. Had they fallen silent for my presence?

Perhaps. But they certainly had for Kali's. I trained the camera upwards, where a faint brown and black shape, with ragged and wavering wings, glided down in a great hailing spiral through all the glittering treasures, the gems and feathers and bones and bindings.

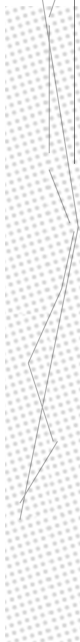
"King! King! Why will you be not carried!" Liking rushed to eir side when e had landed, voice pitched high. But Kali made no answer, only folded eir wings slowly, carefully, painedly.

And e said to me, "Come down. Count this time."

Quietly, I followed em down into the wreck.

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The translucent shell, that fractured thing, had not indeed been the true ship. "A shard," Kali explained as we walked down cracked, rough-hewn stone stairs, "of spine. It was weeks mended, unnoticed in din of janitors a-sky. Tens





and tens, you saw their glow.”

“Sever Malice’s garrison.”

“The tin soldiers he managed kept, oh yes. Meager dowry. Ka.” We continued deeper down this... path. It was a tunnel, in the earth, propped up by perfectly-fitted wooden supports, soil packed down and painted over with stucco. “The ghost of the ship. It was disassembled ages, metals repurposed, but last room one remains. Little library after yours. It is, here.”

And at the end of the tunnel was blackness. The black, black stone of the sun, that compacted and carboned dense obsidian marble that protected all things built in dysonspace, land the See itself. The stone that drank sunlight yet remained perfectly cool, that shimmered with internal radiance, veined with smoky remnants of pearl. I had never seen sunstone in my life, not in person. Never so close to it, even as I waited in my lonely office.

A black, black room, stark and swept, and perhaps the size of two Umihotaru personal offices put together. Ample space for two tengmu and a smaller thing. Two old lanterns on the floor; one’s pattern a phoenix twining around its four sides, and one lightning striking a razed tower.



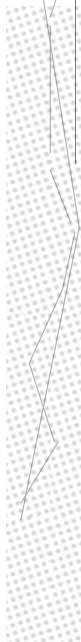
Between those was an arcane solar console, deactivated and rising seamlessly from the stone of the floor, and at that console covered in flowers, covered in wax seals and tiny-lettered slips of paper, with feathers in its ribcage and great, great orbs of raw jade forced into the eye sockets so they cracked, was a single human skeleton slumped over half the length of the room.

“See, the first king of Quay. Al-Marilore Kitahuac. A man fell from the sky, tearing open the old prisons, with God and word aside. He landed here to name us friend.”

“This... Kali, I...”

“What is a king? Delphi says a king must be all types of people at once. They must carry every soul they know within them, and know that spectrum. They must see and love the faces of their subjects, and know their numbers. A king carries all their people may be and become within. This is the meaning of Word. A map of hearts. Something like love. King Kitahuac broke the spine of our world, lance of the egg in secret, and the gift of a billion words. Was he saint? Even a leader? No. Teacher, sustainer, frivolous. What a dreamer!”

Likin shifted from foot to foot, in a mannerism I now rec-





ognized from Harka. The little shifty dance e did when wanting to interrupt, but not having the confidence.

Kali stared at the bones, eir black eyes dancing in the reflected lamplight, sharp and quiet as fire uncaged. “The See chased him like a dog to the edge of the wheel and crippled him where he landed. This is good. A king with body not broken, what use can such creature be? Kaka. Tell me, is this the proper name for sun? Is this the proper use, a gun?”

I couldn’t help but gasp at that word. “Glorification? Savannah... was once a candidate?”

“No.” Kali walked closer, claws gingerly clicking on the perfectly smooth floor. “Oh stars aligned and hidden him. He slipped downshadow of Ares, what solace in its red and empty name, and this became the path he was hurtled. Dodged, only impossible way. He ran in that, hid from the futile sunbeams. I said, lieutenant, that a star fell.”

And so did my heart. So did my heart. Suddenly. The jade in his eyes, more jade than all the grains of it I had known in my life, hundreds of times more. “Kali. Kali. You do not mean to say, you cannot suggest...”



“Quite yes.”

“Does it sleep here? Does it live? Is this - is this how you - ?”

“No. Close. And yes, true the green flame. Many miracles, here by Marilore. Miracle the metal was needed so, that it was peeled away safe. Torn divied without hope of restoration, parts distributed and melted down, stone core used for trinkets and funeral eyes. He crashed. Perhaps he taught us Akkadu so that we would dispose of these things for him incapacitated. He grew this tree to shield the wreck’s operations, another long shadow for our night-known feathers. This, cracked single seed of my city.”

The man whose bones languished before me had stood on the knife’s edge of annihilation. This place, this world, every cell of life had been in the balance. The energy was past, decades removed, the blueprints burned. But I had thought the art that had produced the tengmu awful enough alone to think of, that warped vitalist drive to grow past. But this was beyond. This was primal taboo. This was the wreckage of the same doom of Heath, that once cut lune from land, that drowned the first world, that had made the whole-human heart cry out for their eighth messiah. A jade reactor.





“What,” Kali spoke, “do you know of war?”

I had been thinking of war. I had been thinking of war, perhaps, from the first moment we made dock. Perhaps only since that first night visit? The talk of kings and graves? God, my god, how small and safe this wheel-held world is. It must be safe, for how terribly small it is. A hundred billion lives protected by that old and trusted light, the sun that sanctifies its own path.

The Ecumene was indeed not about peace - conflict was baked into us. But it stood in opposition, as the opposite of, the name War. The foundations were solid, grown into the void between habitats like an all-suffusing root network; every time sunlight warmed your hand was the promise that it was held, and that you may bicker all you like for that door of violence would remain closed. That the fragility would be maintained, that no voice could throw off the lid of Hell that the See perched so carefully on. It was that stage. We were well on the course, well on the way of humanity's Road... so it was given that these were things one thought of, when one thought of the project. It came naturally with the worth of the thing you were protecting. Mine is the hammer, I thought to myself, mine is the harvest; mine is the plowshare of Eden alive.



But now sixteen rain spears backed by all that living light approached - those distant stars that Rain Flower had looked out at, so proud and tall and quiet, when the hunt had ended. For the first time, there was no light any longer, no light in the world, that I felt I held the name to.

“Not this way. Please, not like this. Don’t say these things, this... king, lord, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, is it truly to be here?”

“Redname is right of some things. For her rage. Tell me, abandoned daughter of the high light. What is the price of your peace? I believe it is spears of light and utter dread. Sword divined above neck. Not so bad, you know how gentle that blade. But that woman’s home is gone forever, name unremembered.”

“That is not war! That is censure, a heavy hand, but the stories! It happened there for a reason.”

“And more such censures by the decade. Heavier, and heavier the hand. Its direction whole visible. A thousand years of peace spent flower war ring unbroken, each fire smothered down but unquelled. All civilization crystallized around the conflict that bled its first bedded footings in. On plague and salt and lives.”



“And too on bravery and aid and philosophy, that brutal work of healing. The utter audacity to grasp the blade pointed at you, laughing the while! Of course the human soul is scarred and tired, but what sanctum would we have? Where else might we slow enough to rest? There... there is no other story that suffices. Nothing else can carry us so.”

“I, too, love the Ecumene. I must. Its flourish and truth of edifice is what has captivated me, it is why I believe as I do. It is the highest craft, my craft, the great and only work: city. But worlds still melded when they were met. Still shaved off names and made golden inheritance with their forgetting. In Heath there blossomed a thousand tongues, and all but ten died devoured. The completion cannot be in its own hand. Will it be now? Will it be here? How could my Savannah find a place in that so-tenuous human rainbow? When my door opens it will be a crack through the world, and echo to the heart of the sun, and I have made myself a falling star, that I may see the first motions. How bitter and black, Emelry. It is opening, Emelry, now. I’ve opened it to you.”

“Unfair. That is change, not death. That is refinement, not erasure. The project lives, and I know this, for it still lives in me.” My eyes were red. I gave a muted, disgusting sniff,

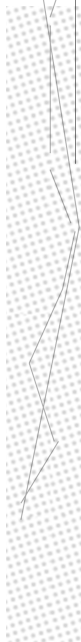


skin cold and throat sitting in me wrong. "Why is it me, Kali? Why am I the one you've brought here?"

"Because you are the one we reached first," e said, cold and soft. "And because Harka named you friend, and e is one I love."

I sobbed. I sobbed every grain of salt out of my body, there, in that tomb in a tomb in a tomb.

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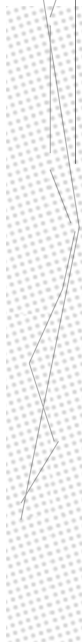


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NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuosity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still

**NOTES**





keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation whose change from The Bears is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

**SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY-** Apart from works such as Subahibi or Amygdalatropolis or No Tiger, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. Swords Under the Phosphor Sky not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits



the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leo-



na's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reali-



ty. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheromones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre.



It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "-punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary" aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that *Cruelty Squad* is a cyberpunk text, in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like *Killer7* - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcél's *PSYCHOGRAMMA*.

*PSYCHOGRAMMA* routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill



post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the “second nature” that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexplicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk’s pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas borrowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less post-modern “metaverse” - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir tends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded “dream-thoughts” through cyberspace,



inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream exemplified in works like *Serial Experiments Lain* - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopolitical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Fox-tel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.



IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Punpun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real world.

The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the





shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanting, but such that its otherworldly setting is a key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply abandoned or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the



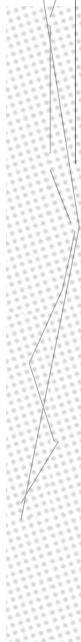
“Heath cycle” - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of “wildness” as newly troubling freedom.

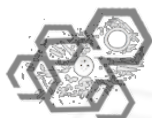
DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the “polyphony” Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the “languages” of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author’s imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispensable to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be understood as intersubjectivity, and in which the “future” does



not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of “small solutions”. Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanting life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.





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